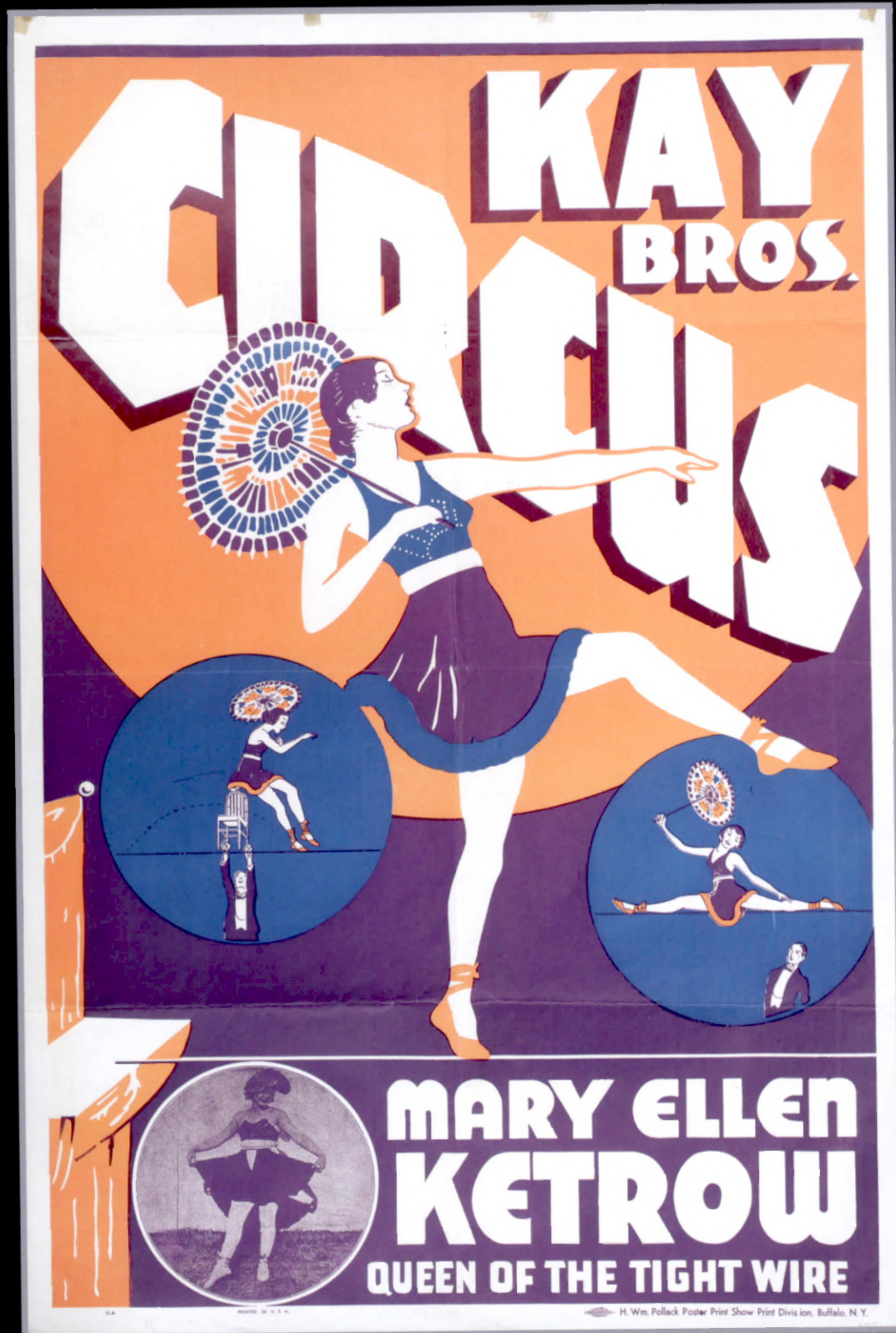


Bandwagon

2014

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The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

Circus Historical Society

The Circus Historical Society's mission is to preserve, promote, and share through education, the history, and cultural significance of the circus and allied arts, past and present.

Founded in 1939, the Circus Historical Society, Inc. (CHS) is a tax-exempt, not-for-profit educational organization. Membership includes people from all walks of life including historians, scholars, circus personnel, memorabilia collectors, Americana specialists, and individuals who share both a love of the circus and a desire to preserve and disseminate its great and interesting heritage.

Benefits of membership include a subscription to CHS's journal, *Bandwagon*. The journal features a range of research and articles related to the rich history of the circus. Article types vary from intensively researched historical essays to wonderfully vivid oral histories that capture the stories of individuals from all aspects of the circus world. Members also receive newsletters filled with fascinating circus facts and news from members, circuses, museums, and other related groups around the world.

CHS members gather annually at a different location in North America to hold a convention. Papers are given, films and slides are presented, meaty tidbits of circus history are exchanged, current circus executives set forth their views and challenges, friendships are renewed and new ones made, all in the interest of circus history preservation. These sessions represent the culmination of a focused year of circus research and writings on the part of many CHS members and are cherished visits to the circus past and present.

**For information on joining the Circus Historical Society,
visit the website at: www.circushistory.org**



Frederick W. Glasier, circa 1905.

Courtesy of the John and Mable Ringling Museum
of Art, Frederick W. Glasier Collection

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The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

2014 Volume 58, Number 1

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Website and Back Issues

An index of *Bandwagon* articles from earlier issues is available online at www.circushistory.org. Back issues are available from the Office of Publication.

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Kay Bros. performers and personnel as photographed by Edward Kelty in 1936.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Circus Historical Society

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Mission Statement

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Note from the Editor

As we begin a new volume of *Bandwagon* for 2014, I am very happy to welcome Fred Dahlinger, Jr. as Associate Editor. For as long as I have known him, Fred has been generous in sharing his knowledge and in encouraging new scholars to explore the possibilities of circus topics. His knowledge of circus history and his familiarity with so many of you and the research you do are wonderful assets that will help assure that *Bandwagon* maintains the high standards set throughout its history.

As always, the process of getting a journal to press involves many people and I am very grateful to many of you who have been so supportive of that undertaking. The Circus Historical Society Board continues to support with stories, images and words of encouragement. This issue includes George Hodge's 1907 account of circuses of the past, an article found in the Milner collection and kindly forward by Maureen Brunsdale, as well as Lane Talburt's celebration of bandleader King Charles Weathersby. The memories of Leon Holecheck, who worked on the Diano Bros. show of 1953, are wonderfully illustrated with images shared by Fred Pfening III. Several other board members have sent me manuscripts that assure fascinating reading for issues to come.

Thanks are also due to CHS members for this issue. Dan Draper's contributions continue his dedication to documenting the careers of some of the most remarkable equestrian artists to grace the rings. Buckles Woodcock has generously allowed us to use a few of the fantastic images that he shares with the readers of *Buckles Blog*. Robert Houston shared images from his collection and Mark Schmitt from the Milner Library and Pete Shrake from Circus World were once again extraordinarily helpful and generous in providing images from the respective collections for this issue. F. Maurice Palinski very kindly shared the memoirs of his friend and CHS member, Leon Holecheck, whose youthful experiences with the Diano Bros. show grew into a lifelong love of all things circus. John and Mardi Wells, CHS members and dedicated designers, have once again labored to create an excellent issue that we all hope you will enjoy.

No *Bandwagon* issue would be possible without the support of the CHS community. I am grateful to all of you who play a part in documenting circus history and as always, I encourage each of you to consider what stories you have to share.

JLP

About the Covers

The two posters that grace the front and back covers of this issue advertised one of the many notable truck shows that toured the United States throughout the first half of the 20th century. Designed with a *Streamline Modern* aesthetic (a late form of Art Deco that evolved in response to the austerity of the Depression years), each poster features cleanly drawn illustrations of the performer in action as well as a halftone photographic image of the star. The bold fields of contrasting colors made these posters especially eye-catching. The posters were printed by Pollack Poster Print of Buffalo, New York sometime in the mid to late 1930s. Both Mary Ellen Ketrow and Saijiro Kitchie performed on Kay Bros. throughout most of the decade.

The following excerpt from Joseph T. Bradbury's Short Sketches of Former Shows: Kay Bros. Circus 1932-38 was published in the Mar-Apr. 1966 issue of Bandwagon. The article in its entirety can be accessed online at circushistory.org.

Kay Bros. was the name selected by William "Bill" Ketrow for his medium sized motorized circus which toured from 1932 to 1938. Ketrow had a long career in outdoor show business which dated back to the turn of the century. He and his brother, Frank, operated a small, successful, motorized circus called Ketrow Bros. for the 1924 through 1930 seasons. The show did not go out in 1931 but Bill was connected with a Tom show that year and no doubt some of the equipment was used. Throughout his career Bill often switched back and forth between various branches of outdoor show business.

For the 1932 season Bill Ketrow organized another circus at his Petersburg, VA quarters using for the first time the title of Kay Bros. Circus. It was a one ringer with a dog and pony show format which carried a single elephant....

The show was gradually enlarged and by 1936 Ketrow had the largest and best show of his life. The equipment was carried on eight large trucks, mainly semis, but the show's caravan had a total of 26 assorted vehicles and 70 people were with it. Ketrow built his own trailers in quarters and they were painted as attractively as any on the road.

It was the policy of the management to continually touch up the paint during the season and each truck was washed weekly.

In 1936 the show had all new canvas. The big top, a six poler, and the four pole sideshow were beauties, the latter sporting a large seven bannerline. The 1936 tent sizes were probably the same as those later ordered for 1937 which was an 80 ft. round with two 40s and two 20s big top and a 50 ft. round with one 30 side show. The big top had comfortable seating including 700 grandstand chairs.

The show's menagerie consisted of two elephants and a couple of cages, all of which were placed in the sideshow.

The 1936 staff was mainly a family affair with William Ketrow, Manager; Mrs. William Ketrow, Treasurer; Bob Ketrow, Asst. Manager and Lot Supt. Bob also was listed along with Milt Robbins as manager of the sideshow. The advance was headed by Frank Ketrow assisted by Tom Kennedy. They had a new bill truck and three billers.

Good balance and some outstanding acts marked the 1936 performance which was under the personal direction of Bill Ketrow who also served as Equestrian Director. The 1 hour and 28 minute performance was made up of many fine acts, some of them unusual for a show no larger than Kay Bros. and included Si and Nellie Kitchie doing perch and balancing acts; Mary Ellen Ketrow (Bill's talented daughter)

with a superb wire act and she also worked the Kay Bros. Dancing Elephants; Edith Bookman, a youngster, on the Spanish web; Slim Biggerstaff and Harry Mathews, single traps; Don Carlos, unsupported ladder; Lola Morales and the Masker Trio, horizontal bars; Buck Leahey, Roman rings; Bob Matthews and his lion, King Tuffey, said to be the only wire walking lion on exhibition; William Pickard and his sea lion, Mickey; the Del Rior Trio; Carlan Troupe; and George and Edith Gregg. Buck Leahey headed up clown alley with five other joeys. There was a 30 minute after show "concert" featuring the Eddys, Australian whip crackers; the pony "Spunkey" who worked with Shirley Temple in the movie *Curley Tops*; the Don Juans, and the Kay Bros, bucking mule, "Dynamite". The performance was given in two wooden rings, an elevated stage, and a steel arena and was in reality a "four ringer." Tom Lamb headed a good seven piece band....



Another Pollack poster printed for the Kay Bros. Circus. The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

King Charles Weathersby

1927-2014

**Harry Truman taught him trumpet,
Dory Miller put him in 'big show,'
Hoxie Tucker added "arrow" duties**

by Lane Talburt

Circus bandleader King Charles Weathersby had a simple reason for playing "Happy Days Are Here Again," a Depression-era tune popularized by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democratic Party, in many big top performances in the 1960s and 70s.

"My first trumpet Harry Truman bought it for me. I was a young kid. We would sit around and he would show me a few pointers. And the main thing we would blow was 'Missouri Waltz' and 'Happy Days Are Here Again.' That was the Democrats' [song], you know."

So how did a 12-year-African American aspiring wind-jammer connect in 1939 with the piano-playing U.S. Senator who succeeded FDR as the 33rd President of the United States in Independence, Missouri? Weathersby also had a ready explanation for this curious set of circumstances:

"You see, my mother would be going between Bonham, Texas (Weathersby's birthplace) and Independence. Her mother—my grandmother—was working there for old man Harry, a wonderful, wonderful fellow. And my grandfather and Harry Truman were very good friends. My grandfather owned property next to him [in Independence]. In fact, Harry Truman's [presidential] library is built on my grandfather's property."

As incredible as it may have seemed, Weathersby claimed his granddad, Moses Davis, was a cook with the notorious Jesse James gang following the Civil War. "But the posse got hot on Jesse James' trail, and my grandfather happened to see a circus come by, a little wagon circus. So in



Al G. Kelly & Miller Bros. Sideshow Minstrels circa 1950.

William "Buckles" Woodcock Collection

order to hide, he joined the circus as a cook and he stayed with the circus.

"He used to wear us to death talking about his experiences with Jesse James."

Many years later a Missouri governor issued a letter of pardon to Davis for alleged minor crimes with outlaws. The pardon was seen as some sort of publicity gag, Weathersby chuckled.

Weathersby also said his grandfather became an accomplished roper and whip-cracking artist who later mentored the likes of Western B-movie star Alfred "Lash" LaRue. William Boyd, better known as "Hopalong Cassidy," was also said to have visited Davis in his Independence home.

From Minstrel Shows to Circuses

Is it any wonder, then, that Charles Edward Weathersby would devote his adult years to a multi-faceted career in show business? After taking his trumpet on various minstrel and medicine shows, he joined the old Al G. Kelly & Miller Bros. Circus in 1948, directing the minstrel band on the sideshow.

That same year Weathersby's musical mentor, President Harry Truman, issued an executive order integrating the nation's armed services. Circus performances, like the great majority of the American entertainment, remained segregated.

He left the sawdust circuit to form his own nightclub band before D. R. Miller called him back in 1962 to take



Al G. Kelly & Miller Bros. advertisement.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

over the Kelly-Miller big top band. In so doing, Weathersby may have become the first black to direct a big top band in the American circus.

Weathersby subsequently fronted the Hoxie Bros. band from 1967 through 1974. For most of those Hoxie years Weathersby's all-black band found itself accompanying the big cage act presented by "Prince Bogino," Manuel "Junior" Ruffin, who likely was the first African-American wild animal trainer on a mud show. In King Charles' early months on Hoxie Bros., owner Leonard Basil "Hoxie" Tucker pressed Weathersby into what the windjammer thought would be a temporary assignment: posting ar-

rows to guide circus vehicle drivers to their next lot. Having acquired the skills—and the discipline, Weathersby continued in that role with other outdoor amusement outfits for four decades. These shows included Circus Vargas, Von Bros., Von Bros.-Cristiani, Alan Hill's Great American, King Royal, Hendricks Bros., and Lewis & Clark circuses, as well as a number of carnivals—among them King Reid, Rod Link, Reithoffer, and Bill Hames shows. Weathersby also claimed he spent time on Dailley Bros. and Rogers Bros. circuses. Mounting health issues forced him off the road in 2011.

Weathersby, who reportedly had been dubbed "King Charles" by Harry and Bess Truman's daughter, Margaret, died on April 22, 2014, just a month shy of his 87th birthday, at a senior rehabilitation center near his home in Ville Platte, Louisiana. His body was cremated. A memorial service was held on April 25 at Franklin Funeral Home in Ville Platte. He is survived by four sons, John, Frank, George and Jessie, all of Ville Platte; five daughters, Eva Frank (Earl) of Ville Platte, Jennifer Weathersby of Los Angeles, Byrda Weathersby of Lafayette, Louisiana, Rowena Harris (Alonzo) of Washington, LA and Versie Terry of Mamou, LA.; one brother, Harold Weathersby; his former wife, Teresa O. Jack of Ville Platte; 17 grandchildren and 22 great-grandchildren.

"I don't know what I'll do next year. I'm old. You can look at me and tell that."

King Charles had passed his 77th milestone when the author encountered the black musician/arrow man on a sun-baked Hendricks Bros. Circus lot in Taylorville, Illinois, on August 19, 2004.

Introduced by circus owner Bob Childress, the veteran trouper produced two webbed folding chairs and, with sounds of the matinee performance emitting from the Hendricks blue-and-white-striped canvas nearby, sat down for a one-hour, late-after-

noon video interview on the show's grassy backyard.

Weathersby prefaced his chat by noting he would need to leave Taylorville while it was still daylight so that he could post arrows to tomorrow's lot in Jerseyville, Illinois, a 74-mile jump to the southwest. His unrelenting battle with diabetes had left him virtually blind at night. A decrepit van parked just a few yards away was equipped with a device that enabled him to check his insulin levels periodically each day. Buried somewhere in the van under a pile of discarded food wrappers and stained coffee cups was a case cradling his trumpet. He said he occasionally pulled out the instrument to test his ability to blow the notes of show tunes imbedded in his memory bank.

This was a vastly different scene from three decades prior when King Charles was enjoying his last year directing bands in both the Hoxie Bros. sideshow and the "big show," as well as nightly arrowing the circus fleet to its next lot down the road.

"Charles was a constant complainer," wrote Fred Powledge, whose classic book, *Mud Show, A Circus Season*, chronicled the lives of troupers along the 1974 route of Hoxie Tucker's three-ring outfit. "But that did not lessen his ability to lead the band through its complex maneuvers each night, and it did not lessen his ability to put up arrows with precision and, sometimes, even grace."

Then, as later, Weathersby had to contend with ever-vigilant lawmen who were equally determined to prevent him from nailing arrows unique to each show—purple for



King Charles Weathersby with Bob Childress, 2004.

Author's collection

Hoxie Bros. and red for Hendricks Bros.—on utility poles, highway signs, and other convenient landmarks to guide show fleet drivers onto the site of the next one-day, two-performance stand.

Weathersby recalled: "Back then," when he was posting arrows for Hoxie, "I was younger, and it was easy for me to see in the dark. You could go down the road at night (and) police wouldn't bother you too much—they'd still bother you, you know."

"You'd go down the road and you'd get on the freeways posting arrows. I could get up quite a few because the traffic wasn't like it is now."

Making the midnight ramble between towns was far from King Charles' dreams when he first hit the road.

Hotel Porter Became Roving Minstrel

Born May 27, 1927, in Bonham, Texas, which, as Weathersby proudly noted, was also the hometown of longtime U. S. House Speaker Sam Rayburn, the black youngster was first hired on at a local hotel as night porter. In spare moments he was already gaining proficiency on a trumpet similar to the one Harry



"DIXIELAND MINSTRELS"

Dixieland Minstrels as pictured in the Kelly-Miller Route Book of 1950. Weathersby is the second from the left on the back row.

Author's Collection

Truman had given him.

"I was about 15 years old. Bonham was a small town and when business got bad at night, I would take a little nap on a hotel sofa. Somebody wanted something, they would come in and wake me up.

"I worked there five years. The boss got sick and died, and then another man took over. He and I didn't get along too good.

"One day I was working the day shift at the hotel. And they were having a minstrel show in town called the Sugar Foot Green Minstrels. Every time they came to town they would parade. So they came in front of the hotel. They stopped, played four or five tunes. Well, I had my trumpet there—my boss didn't like me to have it around blowing; that's something I would do.

"I took my trumpet, went outside, and I just stood there and started going with them. They were playing a tune called

"Blue Lou," a 1930s jazz standard.

"The bandleader's name was Jack Cannon. He said, 'Who are you? Where'd you come from?' I told him I lived here. He said, 'Do you want to travel? I like the way you're blowing right now.'...I said yes. That was 1945. So I left [Bonham] with them. After I left I was on all kinds of minstrel shows. The show I joined was the Sugar Foot [Minstrels]. I also joined the Rabbit Foot, Doc Bartok's Medicine Show, Doc Goodman Medicine Show, all kinds of medicine shows, minstrel shows. I also joined the Bill Hames Shows (a carnival in Texas). So I've just been blowing ever since."

Weathersby also told author Powledge that he had attended Langston University, a segregated college for blacks in Oklahoma. That's where Weathersby apparently learned to read musical scores, although he told this writer "mostly I just learned on the road. I didn't finish [high] school."

Trouping with minstrel shows usually meant riding in



Weathersby, second from right, and others lead camels on the 1951 Kelly-Miller show.

Robert Houston Collection

old school buses or dilapidated cars with a manager.

"Kelly-Miller, I traveled with them a long time," he recalled. "My first season with Kelly-Miller was in 1948. I was sideshow bandleader."

B. B. King Beckoned

Though Weathersby enjoyed the prestige and relative security of having his own band, he was tempted several years later to link up with a rising black guitarist/singer. With his brother Harold and another sax player in tow, Weathersby made an after-hours nightclub visit while Kelly-Miller was playing Dyersburg, Tennessee, in October 1950. "This is the hometown of Floyd King (owner of King Bros. Circus)," he interjected.

"We asked somebody, Where do you go here? Do you have some bands?" They said, 'Yeah. There's a little band playing at a juke joint.' It was a place called the Blue Lights. We got there and there was a guy called B. B. King. He had three other pieces beside himself. So the three of us we just sit in with him. We played the whole date with him. We enjoyed playing with him. After the thing was over, we were packing our horns and [B. B. King] walked up to me. He said, 'I've got some records coming out. Every one of them is going to be a big hit, and I'm going to be known as one of the greatest blues stars.'"

Weathersby sloughed off the opportunity to take up with King's band. When the circus later showed at Opelousas, Louisiana, the minstrel leader encountered King at another nightclub. "Look, I like the way you play trumpet," King told Weathersby. "I'm starting a band, and when your schedule is closed, I want you to come back to Opelousas."

Rejecting his fellow bandleader's second offer, Weathersby formed his own blues band after Kelly-Miller closed the season in late November 1950.

"One night we were playing in Orange, Texas, heading back to Louisiana (where Weathersby had just settled his family in Ville Platte). We put on the radio and heard the deejay out of WLA in Nashville saying, 'Here's a new record I just got today. This guy is going to go!' He said, 'Here it is. It's called "Three O'Clock in the

Morning" by B. B. King.' I said, 'Well I'll be doggone.'"

Weathersby said he never again crossed paths with the Memphis blues legend. For several more years he kept returning to his sideshow responsibilities on the Hugo, Oklahoma, based circus.

The 1955 Kelly-Miller route book listed Jack Kofron as musical director of the "big show band." Guy Smuck was the sideshow manager, and Chas. Weathersby was identified as director of the "colored minstrel." His younger brother, Harold Weathersby, played saxophone. Other members of the eight-member all-black group, identified in a route book photo as "Dixie Minstrels," included Chas. Clark, Harvey Lankford, Chee Chee Carter, M. O. Russell, Ernest Stelly, James Henry Jones, and Joe Pane. Featured artists in the group were "Moose" Kay, Kilroy Nolan, and blues singer Trixie Thomas.

E. L. Johns was sideshow inside lecturer, introducing a magician, fat boy, knife thrower and puppets, fire manipulators, illusions, musical marvel, Hawaiian Village, and the annex attraction—Ray "Talla" Smith.

At that time Kelly-Miller founder Obert Miller was the president and general manager. His sons, Kelly and D. R. Miller, were listed as co-owners. Among personnel on the show during the 1955 season were Tommy Bentley, big show announcer and equestrian director; Harry Thomas, 24-hour man; John "Camel Dutch" Narfski, superintendent of menagerie; Freddie Logan, superintendent of elephants; Jesse "Corky" Clarke and John "Red" Farraher, superinten-



Kelly-Miller Sideshow Minstrels circa 1952.

William "Buckles" Woodcock Collection

dents of ring stock; and Ira M. Watts, purchasing agent. Art Miller was the show's general agent and Arthur Bitters was director of publicity. G. Paul Jones was manager of advertising cars, and Charles Anderson was boss billposter, heading up a crew of 20 billers.

After a few years heading up the sideshow band, Weathersby said, "I quit the circus business. For the next 10 years I had my own little band around Louisiana.

"I made a little money, but you know how that goes. When you've got a band, you don't report wages for your musicians. You don't deduct income tax. And so that kind of hurt me in my Social Security. Nothing was paid, nothing was deducted, nothing turned in at all, you know. Nightclub owners just handed you your money under the table."

Black Bandleader Debuts Under Big Top

These financial setbacks led Weathersby to call on Dorey Miller when Kelly-Miller returned to Louisiana in the early 1960s. "And he decided to put me in the big top. That was just at the height of the civil rights movement, and everybody was raising hell and everything. D. R. told me, 'Get yourself a good band. I'm going to put you in the big show.' He said, 'You'll be the first black to ever play one as far as I know. Do you know of one?' I said, 'No.' [Miller] said, 'Well, after I get you started, everybody's going to want you.' He said, 'I want you to get a good band and blow loud like you always did in the sideshow.'

"And D. R. Miller was right. After that I could almost name my job on circuses."

It was an unusual arrangement, as circus historian Leland L. Antes Jr., noted in his review on Kelly-Miller in *Bandwagon's* November-December 1962 issue:

"Two different bands play for the big show performance," Antes wrote. "First, Lloyd Watton and his family play the pre-show concert with trumpet, air calliope, and drums. Then the [Weathersby] sideshow band plays until the flying act is being rigged. Finally, the Wattons come back to play for the flyers and the bull finale...All over and out with no concert."

Using the Watton family to play the pre-show concert and to fill in for the Flying Padillos and Freddie Logan's 11 elephants performing the long mount on the front track made perfect sense. It freed up Weathersby and his aggregation to carry out their duties ballying for the sideshow on the midway as circus patrons arrived on the lot, then performing minstrel routines inside. By leaving the main performance well before the finale, the black musicians could be in position to entice the exiting towners to take in the sideshow attractions on the way to their cars.

In his 1962 review, Antes made a distinction between the two bandstand leaders. He listed Lloyd Watton as "bandmaster," and "King Chas. Weathersby, with six sidemen," as "sideshow bandmaster."



Dorey Miller in the Kelly-Miller Route Book of 1950.

Author's Collection

By the time Weathersby returned to his former employer, the Kelly-Miller roster had undergone considerable change, the primary one being Dorey Miller's ascension to ownership of the family-operated high grass show. Joe McMahon was now the manager, and Henry Thompson ran the sideshow. Ione Stevens had taken over concessions, and Eugene Garner was the equestrian director. Fred Logan retained his bull boss post, with Wm. Woodcock Sr. designated as bull boss emeritus.

Segregation "Not a Problem"

Although Kelly-Miller's route took the circus to many Southern communities, Weathersby said he was not bothered by racism. Asked if he or his band had problems with segregation, he responded, "We were a segregated show. No problem. Never, ever did I have any problem..."

"I'll tell you what. In 1962 I was with Kelly-Miller in Oxford, Mississippi. That's when James Meredith was trying to integrate the college there (University of Mississippi's Law School)..."

"The governor had the state troopers out and they was camping at the National Guard Armory. We were showing right next door there. The lieutenant governor was there, you know, commanding them. They were the sweetest and

nicest people you've ever seen. My drummer was Sparky Jones, and we got to ballying in front of the sideshow. The lieutenant governor walked up to (Sparky) and said something, and I saw them laugh....He slapped Sparky on the back, and that was it."

"King Charles was being pragmatic" by straddling the segregated divide of that era in society at large and specifically on the circus, according to circus historian Rob Fuller in a May 3, 2014 interview with the writer. Raised in a racially segregated Southern town, in a family where his mother and grandmother toiled as domestics in white households—like the Trumans in Independence—and devoting his early professional career to trouping with all-black bands, "he accepted segregation," Fuller said. "In those days blacks were seated in separate sections under the big top. Black workmen were not allowed on the midway and ate in a segregated area in the cook tent."

That didn't mean Weathersby was immune to racial slights or taunts. For example, he recalled an experience during a Kelly-Miller stand that set off a temper tantrum:

"I was downtown, and I parked my car. As a joke, a candy butcher on the show, Donnie McIntosh [assistant concessions superintendent], wrote a note and stuck it on my windshield. It said, 'I'm with the KKK [Ku Klux Klan] and I'm watching you. I want you to be careful.' And, boy, I got mad! I happened to see Donnie, and I told him about it. He went to laughing, and I realized he was the one (who wrote the note). But other than that, no problem. Not at all."

Weathersby's Boat Show Baptism

The following season brought the circus a different—and costly—set of problems. Dory Miller detached the black bandleader from the main show route to join Miller's unique boat circus on a summer tour of the Canadian Maritime Provinces.

"At Olean, New York, on a Saturday, D. R. walked up to me and said, 'Charles, I'm going to transfer you to my boat circus. I want you to leave as soon as you can go to Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, and meet the boat. By that time I'll be there,'" Weathersby recalled the owner telling him.

"With Jelly Roll Rogers and several other fellows in my band, we took off. We made it to Yarmouth, and there was no boat. Two or three of D.R.'s representatives said, 'The boat's had trouble and it's going to be late.'"

That was an understatement, as circus historian Fred D. Pfening Jr. pointed out in his account of the boat circus in a superbly researched article published in the September-October 1993 issue of *Bandwagon*.

Miller had outlined in a March 25, 1963 letter to Fred Phillips, a New Brunswick circus and carnival publicist, that his planned show "will not be a gilly operation as we are building wagons of a size and shape so that they can be swung aboard the ship and stowed in the hold. However of

a necessity this type of show will have to show coastal towns, or so close to the coast as to make them within our reach for a one day show...With this type of operation we can really get into virgin territory, such as Newfoundland, Labrador, etc."

The audacious circus owner had made his own virgin attempt at launching a boat circus with a similar venture to Jamaica during the previous winter. Though he had envisioned that outfit to stay out six weeks with visits to other West Indies islands, it lasted only 15 days in one location, Kingston, before returning to West Palm Beach, Florida.

Not one to give up easily, Miller located another ship, the *Fleurus*, to make the Canadian trek out of Jacksonville, Florida.

Though pre-occupied in April at the circus winter quarters in Hugo with launching the 1963 Kelly-Miller domestic show and assisting his father, Obert Miller, debut the short-lived Fairyland Circus, D.R. took time to inform his Canadian contact that his leased circus boat "is diesel and has steam winches. It has 14½ foot draft, 210 feet long and 33 feet wide." (The boat's relatively shallow draft would enable it to dock at most maritime ports.)

Miller's Show 'Under Water' from Outset

General agent Charlie Campbell was dispatched on his first trip to Canada to establish a route. He set the inaugural date tentatively—and much too optimistically, as things turned out—for June 1.

"This is a Sea-Going Circus, featuring four Wild Animal Acts, which are presented in a steel arena," Campbell wrote to select city officials in Nova Scotia in advance of his scouting mission. "The Circus will dock at your local wharf to unload and proceed to the Circus Grounds. There the 'Big Top' will be erected, which seats 1,200 people."


Campbell's original "official route" called for the seaborne circus to set up for its maiden one-day, two-performance stand at North Head, on Manan Island, New Brunswick, then to reach Yarmouth for a June 4 booking. Problems with the aged ship delayed the show's getting under way from Jacksonville until May 27. In the meantime, Miller simply touted his marine outfit as "#2 Show" in an *Amusement Business* want ad. On the official letterhead, the show was identified as "Al G. Kelly & Miller Bros. Boat Circus, Incorporated, D. R. Miller, General Manager." A herald promoting the show along its Canadian route touted "Al G. Kelly & Miller Bros. Circus, North America's Foremost Show" with a boxed notice that this was a "Limited Engagement, Direct From The United States in All Its Magnitude And Entirety." An ad for the show's second intended port of call, at Digby, was anchored by a standard cut of a tiger and bore the title "Al G. Kelly & Miller Bros. 2nd Largest Circus." A notice at the top of that ad declared: "This is positively the first and only large Circus to be transported from town to

YARMOUTH

AUSPICES
FIRE
DEPARTMENT

ONE DAY ONLY

Tuesday, June 11th



NOTE — This is positively the first and only large Circus ever to be transported from town to town on its own ocean going diesel motored ship. Be at dockside to see this great Circus unload.

3 — Performing Elephants — 3

4 World Renowned WILD ANIMAL ACTS 4

Presented in the Steel Arena.

Scores of AEROBATIC & TRAPESTE ARTISTS

CAPT. EDDY and his MAN-KILLING
Jungle-bred LIONS.

Acres of Tents

Vast Cages of WILD ANIMALS.

ALG. KELLY AND MILLER Bros.



2nd Largest — CIRCUS

One Day Only — 2 Performances
Afternoon and Evening

Ad for the ill-fated boat show.

town on its own ocean going diesel motored ship.”

Bad luck struck the fledgling outfit from the first day of loading in Jacksonville; one of three elephants and two ponies broke loose and, as *Bandwagon* editor/writer Pfening reported, “A few hundred yards from shore the steering mechanism broke down and the boat laid in the water until repairs could be made.”

Stranded aboard the latter-day Noah’s Ark were almost four dozen performers and staff, including headliner Capt. Eddie Kuhn, who had made a mad dash from a spot date in Montana to Florida. According to a June 8, 1963 *Amusement Business* article, “the cargo also included some 50 animals... elephants, lions, tigers, bears, zebras, llamas and horses... and equipment that included a big top and bleachers.”

With the boat continuing to encounter mechanical-related delays, on June 21 general agent Campbell notified his Canadian promoter that “of course all dates are to be moved back again...Plenty of people were on hand, on dates billed, but were all disappointed. Several people waiting on boat’s arrival (in Yarmouth), band arrived off the big show yesterday.”

Weathersby and his windjammers helped unload the *Fleurus* when it finally docked there on June 24, fully 20 days late. “They had four trucks on that boat, three elephants, two cat acts—that was Eddie Kuhn and his cat act and that Hawthorn cat act—a leopard and Siberian dogs. And we had two zebras and about four llamas. We had a sideshow too, and my job was to play the sideshow with about three or four pieces to attract attention and the rest of us would all go back and play the big show,” he recalled.

“So we gave that show in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia—two shows—and we didn’t do any business, and we were getting ready to go to Shelburne.”

Fire Destroys Boat, but Show Goes On

Weathersby said a fire broke out aboard the jinxed ship as it was being reloaded in Yarmouth in the early afternoon of June 26. What happened, he said, was “we couldn’t get up enough steam to make the (ship’s) cranes work. So one of the crew members—it was a ship under Panamanian registry—went down into the boiler room. He broke the fuel line that stuck directly into the boiler. And when he did that he set the whole ship afire.

“They called the fire department, and the fellows working there were taking all the animals off. Every one of the cats [in the specially built cage wagons]—they were really ferocious—they allowed themselves to be picked up and handed to somebody. They put them on the dock, and they just stayed there. We got the elephants out, and the only thing we lost was one of the zebras.”

An after report by Eddie Kuhn, who also served as the show’s executive manager, in the July 13, 1963 *Amusement Business*, noted that “two men were bitten while moving the



Von Bros. Big Show Band in 1965.

James Cole Collection, on Buckles Blog

leopard to safety. Another got a cracked rib in the hold."

The boat sunk to the harbor bottom. Crews were able to save the big top, seats, and poles as well as motorized equipment. The boat was later resurfaced and towed to sea, where it was dynamited and sent to a watery grave.

Civil Defense agencies and the Red Cross came to the aid of "some 60-80 employees," according to a July 6 *Amusement Business* dispatch. A local businessman staged a benefit performance at the Yarmouth Legion Hall on June 28 so that stranded circus folk would have spending money while circus equipment was still being removed from the sunken ship and while the unlucky show was being reorganized. In addition, noted the July 13 *Amusement Business*, "Dory Miller sent the menagerie and sideshow 47 miles away to Weymouth for a Dominion Day (July 1) celebration, using six trucks sent to Yarmouth by the sponsoring Weymouth Kiwanis

"D. R. still had three trucks," Weathersby remembered. "So we decided we would just try to make some spots by

land. And he hired one or two more trucks. We tried all that, with ferries and things. We went way up to St. John, New Brunswick, and we couldn't do any business."

Miller threw in the towel on July 27 after a two-show day at Alberton. A planned two-day stand at Amherst on August 1-2 was among the abandoned bookings, which also were to have included a number of dates in Newfoundland and Labrador. In a July 20 letter to office manager Jack Smith, general agent Campbell laid out one of the events that brought the hapless show to a halt. "I think now that the seats falling in Port Hawkesbury (July 18) knocked me out of Amherst, they read it in the paper the next day."

Weathersby Meets Vonderheid

To preserve what business was left for the failed Unit 2, "D. R. booked the circus out in the States on the King Reid carnival," Weathersby said.

According to Pfening's 1993 article, "The August 10 *Amusement Business* reported that Eddie and Charlene

Kuhn's lion and bear act were to work as a free midway attraction. The three elephants, staked out on the midway, were also to do a free act. The Kelly-Miller menagerie tent added 120 feet to the carnival midway. The Kelly-Miller sideshow band went along and augmented Reid's musical crew in the minstrel show."

"And I loved it," Weathersby recalled 40 years later. "King Reid was wonderful to work for. The guy that had the minstrel show, Happy Bruno, booked in with Reithoffer [carnival]. We went with him."

Pfening's story picked up the thread of the Kelly-Miller saga. "Amusement Business noted it was understood other personnel on the [Canadian] tour would rejoin the main Kelly-Miller show then playing Wisconsin. Following the close of the carnival dates the remaining equipment was sent to the main show."

That's when a fate interceded on behalf of Weathersby and his bandsmen.

"We were playing [a fair date at] Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, and we were out ballying in front of the girls' show," he explained. "When we finished, a guy walks up and he says, 'My name is Henry Vonderheid, and you sound like you could play a circus.' I said, 'Well, I just came off the Kelly-Miller boat circus. We sank up in—' 'Oh, you're King Charles.' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'Do you have Jelly Roll Rogers with you?' I said, 'Jelly Roll's back there sleeping someplace, or whatever he's doing.' [Vonderheid] said, 'Look, I'm buying the old Mills Bros.' three elephants and all their animals and the tent and everything. In 1964 I'm going out, and I want you to work for me. I'll shake hands with you.' So we agreed. And during the wintertime he kept in touch with me."

"In 1964 we opened with Von Bros. Circus in Dover, Delaware."

Weathersby and his advance van.



Robert Houston Collection

Weathersby played full seasons with Von Bros. as the big show bandleader from 1964 through early 1967. He was with the outfit when Pete Cristiani teamed with Vonderheid on the Von Bros.-Cristiani Circus for the first part of the 1966 season. "Pete Cristiani's son, Tony, played drums in my band. And he was a wonderful drummer, wonderful drummer," King Charles said.

In the January-February 1968 *Bandwagon*, Tom Parkinson reported that in February, 1967, "Von Bros. announced plans to tour despite Henry Vonderheid's illness. In late April, ...Vonderheid died and his widow continued with the show. [In May] Von Bros. closed..."

King Charles Adds 'Temporary' Duties

Weathersby's next port of call marked a turning point in his career. He picked up an assignment that would be his stock and trade for the remainder of his professional life on the show business circuit.

King Charles took his musical aggregation to Hoxie Tucker's circus, then embarking on its sixth season. "I went to Hoxie in 1967. When he hired me, Hoxie asked me, 'Will you blow some in front of the sideshow and play the big house?' I said, 'Yes.' And we made a deal for that. That was in '67."

Weathersby brought along members of his band, including brother Harold. He also was joined during the summer months by his older son, John, who worked on the big top canvas crew headed by a second important African-American on the circus—Manuel "Junior" Ruffin.

"There was a fellow there putting up arrows named Randy. And Randy wanted to go home," Weathersby said. "He told Hoxie, 'I gotta go home.' So Hoxie asked me, 'You think you could put up a few arrows for a few days until I can get somebody?' I said, 'I guess I can.'"

"Hoxie showed me all about it, you know. Hoxie never let me quit; he never let me quit. I got so accustomed to it that at night when the circus was over, and everybody was loading their gear and everything, I would jump in my van or whatever I had and take off and put up arrows."

King Charles arrowed the show to its next booking at night while Ruffin, following his center-ring performance as wild animal trainer "Prince Bogino," supervised the tear-down. Weathersby would be sleeping when Ruffin, driving

a cab pulling the pole wagon, arrived next morning at the new town to lay out the lot.

Weathersby quickly adapted to his new arrowing duties, which capped off afternoon and evening performances in the sideshow and big show.

"Things then were different. You didn't have the drug trade, and police wouldn't bother you too much—they'd still bother you, you know. You'd go down the road at night, and you'd get on the freeways putting up arrows. I could get up quite a few because the traffic just wasn't like it is now. Nothing was like it."

In an act of defiance that Weathersby later would mirror, Ruffin blew the show just before the start of the 1974 Hoxie tour, partly out of pique over the owner's refusal to reimburse the wild animal trainer for purchasing four young lions for his Prince Bogino routine, but mostly because a rival owner, Cliff Vargas, offered to double Ruffin's salary.

King Charles continued leading the sideshow and main performance bands and serving as arrow man along the 1974 Hoxie Bros. route. But he, too, left in a huff following the final performance of the season in Valdosta, Georgia.

Prior to striking up the band, Weathersby complained to *Mud Show* author Fred Powledge about Tucker's refusing to compensate him for a \$1.35 long distance call to warn the fleet to detour around a weigh station and later for the purchase of folding chairs at 35-cents each from a Salvation Army store for the band's use.

After the closing notes of "Auld Lang Syne," Powledge wrote, "John Weathersby (King Charles' son) drove the fork-lift...through the back door...His father held up his hand, and John stopped the fork-lift next to the bandstand. Charles picked up the band's folding chairs and put them, one by one, in front of the fork-lift's tires. John ran over the chairs, flattening them like pieces of paper...King Charles left for Ville Platte."

This would be the dapper bandleader's last appearance on a circus or carnival sideshow or under a big top.

From Hoxie Tucker to Cliff Vargas

Weathersby landed on his feet, taking on 24-hour duties for Circus Vargas at the start of that show's 1975 season on the West Coast. He was accompanied by several of his sons and their friends, who went to work for boss canvasman man Junior Ruffin.

"Vargas opened the show in February in San Leandro, California. We played a couple of towns, and then we went down to San Diego."

Demonstrating Circus Vargas' legendary cross-country treks, "we jumped all the way from San Diego to Pensacola, Florida, all by trucks. Then we went all the way down to Miami Beach. All the time I'm putting up arrows. We left Miami Beach and went to Birmingham, then on to El Paso, Texas. Bear in mind, though, that we'd stay 10 to 12 days [at

each shopping mall or lot], with plenty of time in between.

"I was driving Vargas' stake driver carrying extra stakes, and I had a little house trailer hooked on the back. I'd get in one town, lay out the lot and drive in the stakes. And then Junior, the boss canvasman man, would come in behind me in a few days, and he'd have the pole wagon. He'd drop the poles, and have everything set [so that] when the rest of the crew came in, we'd immediately get the show set up [for a performance] that night.

"All of a sudden [during the 1975 tour] I wasn't too pleased with Vargas, because he wanted to change things around. He wanted to make Junior lot superintendent, and he wanted to make 'Oklahoma Red,' Ward Hall's sideshow boss canvasman man, as the (big top) boss canvasman man. I didn't like that at all. So one day the big top blew down (in Mt. Clemons, Michigan). And I got mad. I had my kids and their friends out of Louisiana. I got mad and drove all the way home."

In an April 28, 2014 interview with the writer, John Weathersby told the author he stayed behind to complete the Vargas season with Ruffin. John Weathersby later helped Ruffin put together a lion act for Garden Bros. He also served on canvas crews for King Royal, Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. and Alan Hill's Great American Circus. In the 1990s John Weathersby served as a truck driver on Ringling Bros.

King Charles home stay was brief. He called carnival owner Rod Link, who immediately offered him a job. "He had two shows, the Rod Link Carnivals and the World of Pleasure Shows. I was doing just like I'm doing here [on Childress' Hendricks Bros. Circus]. I was routing his show and putting up arrows. I also was putting out the coupons [in local businesses where the carnival played]."

Weathersby remained with Link until the carnival owner's death in 1993.

"And when he died, I went to John Davenport—Gopher—on King Royal Circus. I stayed with him for a couple of years. And I won't say why, but everybody in the business knows why you wound up not liking it.

"So I called my good friend (animal trainer) Bobby Gibbs. And Bobby said, 'Why don't you call Bob Childress.'"

Weathersby was almost 70 years old when Childress hired him in 1996 to arrow Hendricks Bros. He remained when Childress fielded Lewis & Clark Circus.

"Everybody enjoyed working for him," Weathersby said during his 2004 interview. "Everybody here performing with us, they're well satisfied. Now there are other guys who have come by and they just bug you. Bob, if he sees a fellow drinking a beer or something, he won't say anything...But we don't have any drunks around."

As a former bandleader, King Charles said one of the biggest changes he noticed during his career was "it's a rare thing to find a band on a circus. It's all canned music with recordings." (And that included the Hendricks performance.)



Tributes to King Charles Weathersby

"Although his name is not noted in the pantheons of circus greats, his saga will nonetheless live on in the hearts and minds of those who loved and befriended him along the sawdust trail."

Circus historian and CHS member Robert Fuller Houston was among those paying tribute to their friend and fellow big top veteran, King Charles Weathersby, African-American bandleader and 24-hour man who died on April 22, 2014.

In a prepared tribute to the windjammer and arrow man, Houston summarized the contributions of his long-time friend:

"As one of the most popular sounds on the American midway, Weathersby's bands consisted mostly of a half dozen or so versatile musicians playing traditional circus standards in the Dixieland jazz style. Although all black or 'minstrel' bands had traditionally been limited to the sideshow, circus owner Dorey Miller (in a shrewd economic move) handpicked Weathersby's musical organization to a kind of 'double duty' as the Al G. Kelly & Miller Bros. Circus' Big Top and Sideshow Band."

Houston, founder of the Philadelphia Museum of the Circus, noted that "like many gifted and noteworthy outdoor show troupers of color, we are not likely to find [Weathersby's] story among the pages of volumes dealing with the history of the circus."

At the same time Weathersby acknowledged that the public's tastes in music had undergone radical changes.

"The young people do not want to hear you play John Phillips Sousa [marches]. You can't fault these young performers. Their grandmothers and grandfathers performed to John Phillip Sousa. That was then. Most of the people who are watching them [today] are younger people.

"That's one of the reasons I don't have a band, because all of the older people are dead or too old and just don't come out. The rappers aren't going to come out and hear [circus music], and I wouldn't want them to come out [laugh] at all. Don't want to even be around them."

Weathersby concluded on an optimistic note, singling out the establishment of an all-black show, UniverSoul Circus. "There will always be a circus. But it will be different." **Bw**

The author wishes to thank past CHS presidents Fred Pfening III and John Polacsek for assisting in the research for this article.

King Charles Weathersby posting arrows for Hendricks Bros., 2004.

Author's collection

He qualified Weathersby's distinction as leading "the first African American band in modern times" in a circus, pointing out that Francis Johnson, "Philadelphia's brilliant 19th century music man and his famed band, had been featured with the Joseph Cowell Circus at that city's Walnut Street Theater in 1824."

Over the years [Weathersby] would meet many famed personalities, including Harry Truman and his daughter, Margaret, who would dub him with the nickname 'King Charles'. B. B. King was so impressed with his musical abilities that the all time blues great offered him a spot with his up and coming band.

Circus owner Bob Childress, who called on Weathersby's talents as an arrow man on Hendricks Bros. and Lewis & Clark circuses from 1996 until his retirement in 2011, praised Weathersby in an April 28, 2014, interview with the author:

"He was one of the best [24-hour men] in the business as far as I'm concerned.

"He had an amazing memory. We would be on a lot in Pennsylvania and he would tell me, 'I played this same lot when I was on Von Bros.' Or, in Ohio, 'I played this lot when I was on Hoxie.'"

Childress also said Weathersby returned to his home in Ville Platte, LA, at the end of each season. "He'd start calling me in December to ask when the next season was to start. Then he'd always come to winter quarters [in Easley, South Carolina] a month early.

GEORGIA SWEET



Thrilling Rider in the Circus

by John Daniel Draper

Billed as "America's Most Fearless and Daring Horsewoman," Georgia Sweet's career spanned nearly thirty years. As a Wild West trick rider and manege artist, she performed with Joe Greer and some of the other top trick riders of her day on Cole Bros., Robbins Bros., and Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. Born in 1896, Georgia married equestrian Charles Sweet.

Georgia Sweet and her husband Charles mastered Wild West riding and passed time at her mother's, Mrs. S. J. Streeter, ranch near Huron, South Dakota. As early as 1911 Charles Sweet had been a clown, roper, and rough rider on Bulger & Cheney Circus, owned by Corliss Bulger and Bud Cheney. This was a small circus which was out only for the season of 1911.

In 1924 Georgia Sweet rode a manege horse on Charles A. Sweet's Wild West Attractions that travelled with the Nat Reiss Shows. In April of 1925 Charlie and Georgia Sweet arrived at Greensburg, Indiana to join the U. S. Western Rodeo Company after spending the winter in South Dakota. For the regular season, Georgia Sweet and Charles were on Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus in the Wild West concert under the direction of Johnny McCracken. Georgia did trick riding and Charles did sensational bronco riding in 1925. In the concert the following persons took part: Johnny McCracken, Ethel McCracken, Carl and Mrs. Bruce, Jack and Billie Cavanaugh, Mrs. McKee, Jack Hughes, Charles and Georgia Sweet, and Minnie Chennette. A thrilling finish was given to the concert by a realistic pony express race



Preparing for her act, circa 1930.



Georgia Sweet's act was worthy of several poster designs printed by Erie for the Cole Bros. show.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

ridden by Johnny McCracken and Carl Sweet.

In the circus season of 1926 the Sweets were again on the Wild West of Hagenbeck-Wallace. They were accomplishing some wonderful trick riding on the hippodrome track and in the Wild West sections. Bill Penny was in charge of the Wild West. In addition to Charles Sweet, Roman rider, and Georgia Sweet, trick rider, the Wild West included William and Estria Keffner, George and Mrs. Bennett, Edith Cooper, Bessie Hirser, and ropers Lefty Christian and Henry Lenox. Georgia's mother visited the show in August with her grandson, six year old Master Philip.

On January 27th, 1927 they went to the London Hippodrome Circus in the Memphis Auditorium. Charles and Georgia were with Cy Compton's Wild West on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey for the regular season. Georgia was one of ten ladies doing trick riding on a bronco. Also for part of the season, particularly at Chicago on Sells-Floto Circus, she was one of eight performers posing with the Arabian models. Others in the group were Nellie Russell, Evelyn and Constance Brightwell, Miss Burns, Shirley De

Ray, Bobbie Paffen, and Miss Carr. On the regular official 1927 program for Sells-Floto Circus Georgia Sweet was listed as one of forty-two riders of high school horses, trained and perfected by Mr. Joe Miller, "America's Premier Horseman". Among the members of this group were Irene Ledgett, Hallie McCabe, Miss Goodenough, Bebe Costello, Mickey King, Hazel Logan, and Louise Griebel.

In 1928 both of the Sweets were on the Wild West of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus where they did trick riding and Charles also did roping. For the years 1929, 1930, 1933, and 1934 they largely repeated this performance. In a newspaper account for Rockford, Illinois for August 12th, 1930, Georgia was pictured on a rearing horse with the heading "Ride 'Em Cowgirl!" The caption continued: "Georgia Sweet is one of a group of pretty and daring girls who ride horses high, wide and handsome in the Wild West show which follows each performance. Some of the greatest ropers, trick riders and riders of bucking horses that have come out of the west in years are found on this show. They are led by Cy Compton, who is assisted by his son and



Roman riding across the show lot, circa 1930.

daughter, Cody and Myrtle, and his wife, Lillian."

Georgia Sweet rode in the Cleveland Grotto Show in February of 1934.

For 1935 Georgia had her fifteen year old son Philip with her on the Cole Bros. tour. She performed as an aerial ladder gymnast, rode a high school horse, and was in the Wild West concert. The next year she rode a high school horse on Cole Bros. at both the Chicago Stadium and in Los Angeles. In 1936 she also drove a fourteen horse hitch on Cole Bros. Circus. In 1937 both Clyde Beatty and Ken Maynard were featured performers on the Cole Bros. show. Georgia Sweet performed on the ladders and rode a high school horse at the Chicago Stadium. The manege riders were Pat Lindsey, Ruby Cutshall, Bertha Denham, Wanda Wenz, Betty Stevens, Bobbie Patterson, Billie Cooke, Georgia Sweet, Josephine Tatum, Viola Barnett, Gladys Wick-off, Alice Foster, Louise Bell, Adraine Bell, Norma Humes, Dorothea Carter, Helen Sharon, Estelle Clark, Anita McCree, Gayl Thomas, Peggie Baker, Anna Butler, May Keene, Polly Courtney, Darlene Harding, Rose Davis, Marie Kress, Marlene Kress, Dorothy Jewell, Ruth Crothe, Ann Winnicki, Jacqueline Roberts, Jackie La Rue, Mary Matson, Jean Allen, and Esma Wilson Maley.

Ken Maynard's Wild West in 1937 was made up of Barbara and Terry Bardole, Ann Butler, Dorothea Carter, Jimmie and Alice Foster, Darlene Harding, Mr. and Mrs. Chet Howell, John Korniloff, Jerry Lee, Buck Nelson, Steve G. Seline, Valeria Seline, Sultan Shakmanoff, Georgia Sweet, Cecil Tatum, Gayl Thomas, James and Rose Washington, Cyse O'Dell, and a troupe of Indians. Jumping horses were ridden by Miss Georgia Sweet, Miss Anna Butler, Miss Jessie Goodenough, Ralph Clarke, John O'Brien, and Jack Joyce. Georgia did Roman standing riding, galloping the sixteen



Roman riding on the back lot, circa 1940.

horse hitch on the track. Jack Joyce watched on the curves. Philip Sweet drove the galloping mule and cart which carried the hose for the fire house act.

In 1938 Georgia was with the Famous Robbins Bros. Circus, a second unit of Cole Bros. Circus. Advertised as "one of the world's foremost equestriennes," she amazed the patrons with her whirlwind riding of rearing and hurdling horses. In addition she was one of three principal riders, the other two being Juanita Hobson and Rose Wallet. They were graceful and agile riders and Miss Hobson was particularly good in her spectacular fire jumps.

Robbins Bros. Circus in 1938 moved on fifteen cars, one advance, four stocks, six flats, and four coaches. It was aluminum in color with the title in blue and orange. Its parade included an air and a steam calliope. It carried one Mack truck, five cages, six tableau wagons, and fifteen baggage wagons. There were ten elephants, three camels, one zebra, one donkey, eighteen ponies, twenty four head of ring stock, and forty head of baggage stock. Hollywood cowboy Hoot Gibson was a drawing attraction. There were ten Wild West riders. John Smith directed the liberty horses. The Hobson Family of riders and the Aerial Behees were also there.

The show was under a 135 round plus 1-50 and 2-40s big top, later cut at Newark, Ohio to a 120 round due to adverse economic conditions. There was a four pole menagerie top. The staff was also cut and the production numbers



Another Erie poster advertising Sweet's act.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

were reduced from eight to four. The girls rode in the spec and the manege riders worked on the web, took tickets, and ushered. Children's admission price was reduced from fifty cents to twenty five cents.

The Robbins Bros. show was sending money to Cole Bros. Circus to keep that show on the road. It made an extended tour of Canada from May 31st to June 29th. The Cole Show closed its season on August 3rd at Bloomington, Illinois. Robbins Bros. Circus was enlarged at Bluefield, West Virginia on August 15th. Six cars from Cole Bros. were added: two flats, two stocks and two coaches. The train was now twenty-one cars with nine cages of Clyde Beatty's wild animals. One stock car carried the Wild West stock. Ken Maynard had previously left Cole Bros. On October 22nd Robbins Bros. Circus closed at Decatur, Alabama. Adkins and Terrell were bankrupt. They eventually arranged loans to enable them to take out a twenty car Cole Bros. Circus in 1939.

Charles Sweet died at the age of 57 in Huron, South Dakota on October 13th, 1938 after four years of illness and idleness. In addition to Georgia, he was survived by a son, Philip. Burial was in Huron.

Georgia Sweet soon after married Auvil Gilliam of Waco, Texas. He was well known in rodeo and circus circles.

At that time they were both with Greer and Hammer's Rodeo, playing at Dubuque, Iowa

Georgia Sweet continued intermittently on Cole Brothers for a period of nine years through 1947.

In 1939 Art Mix had the Wild West Contingent of ten cowboys and cowgirls on that show. Georgia performed in the Wild West act and also rode a high school horse. The next year, 1940, she rode manege and a Roman standing act and was in the Wild West. The Wild West contingent under Ken Maynard consisted of Auvil Gilliam, Georgia Sweet, Jack Wolff, Josephine Tatum, Ann Sutton, Clarence Canary, Alvin Parshall, Ralph Clark, and six Indians from Pine Ridge, South Dakota. The Wild West acts were shooting, whip cracking, trick riding, and roping. Georgia Sweet participated in an excellent manege offering along with Rose Schenk, Ethel Freeman, Cyse O'Dell, Wanda Wentz, Jo-Jo Cofield, Golda Gray, Ann Sutton, Marion Knowlton, Helen Partello, and Marta Tonga.

On February 20th, 1940 there was a serious winter quarters fire that destroyed all of the cage animals and lead stock, elephants, big top, nine cages, the ticket wagon and calliope, several trucks and all the properties and harness. Saved were the large wagon shed, the wardrobe and canvas barn and a small two story office building.

That year there were only two railroad circuses on the road, Ringling Bros. & Barnum and Bailey on ninety railroad cars and Cole Bros. on twenty-five cars. Cole Bros. flats were lettered "Cole Bros. Circus & Ken Maynard's Wild West". The train carried fourteen elephants, three Mack tractors and forty-eight wagons. The America Calliope first appeared, installed in an antique tableau wagon that had been on the Barnum & Bailey Circus. This was the year for the fewest number of motorized circuses on the road. However, there were two motorized circuses out that year that were destined to exist for many years. One was Mills Bros Circus, the first year under this title. The previous year in 1939 it had been called Richards Bros. The other one was Al G. Kelly-Miller Bros.

In 1940 Cole Bros. showed under a 150 big top plus 3-60s with a 70 plus 5-30s menagerie top and a side show with a 70 plus 3-30s.

At the end for the 1940 touring season, the show went into new winter quarters at Louisville, Kentucky.

On March 27th, 1942 Georgia Sweet's son, Pilot Officer Philip Marcus Sweet, aged 22, was killed in action with the Royal Canadian Air Force in England. He was buried in Scapewick Church Yard, Lincolnshire. He was a member of the Royal Canadian Air Force. Several years previously he had performed as an acrobat on Cole Bros. Circus. His mother was now with Eskew's Rodeo.

In 1943 Georgia Sweet rode a high school horse on Cole Bros. Circus. In 1944 she rode high school and performed in the Wild West. In addition she drove the sixteen horse hitch. For 1945 Georgia performed in the Wild West under Hank Linton. Other members of the group were Ella Linton, Gee Gee Engesser, and Edward Lefty Swanson. That year Eugene Scott was superintendent of the menagerie and Milton Herriott was trainer of the blooded horses and a group of five gaited saddle horses.

At Rockford, Illinois Georgia Sweet in 1947, the famed Roman



A PR photo of Sweet, circa 1950.

Standing riding star, was driving the Cole Bros. spectacular sixteen horse hitch, "said to be one of the most awe inspiring displays in the land of sawdust and spangles." She was also one of 16 riders in the equestrian offering of high school horses and, with Anna Butler, was a daring rider of thoroughbred horses. At San Diego that year the "real thrill of the circus begins when Harry McFarland, equestrian director, sounds his silver whistle and the concert band, with Victor Robbins directing, leads the colorful tournament around the hippodrome track, the prelude to a gala three ring, two stage program that follows. A high light of the performance is Clyde Beatty, the youthful wild animal trainer, who enters the steel arena with 40 wild and ferocious lions and tigers and Ken Maynard, the hero of more

than a hundred Wild West films".

In 1948 Georgia Sweet again drove a sixteen horse hitch, this time on Mills Bros. Circus. She also did trick riding in the Wild West. The regular performance display #9 consisted of the Spanish Web. In ring #1 was Virginia Noel, in ring #2 was Ellen Knight, and in ring #3 was Georgia Sweet. The manege display was performed in the three rings. In ring #1 was Georgia Sweet, Margie Butchers, and Martha Ali; in ring #2 was Jennie Mae Snyder, Jeanette Wallace, and Dona Drew; and in ring #3 was Ellen Knight and Eddie Mason. The act concluded with dancing horses on the hippodrome track: "Waltzing" by Jeannette Wallace, "Scotch Highland Fling" by Georgia Sweet, and "After the Ball" by Capt. Burt Wallace, who was also the equestrian director.

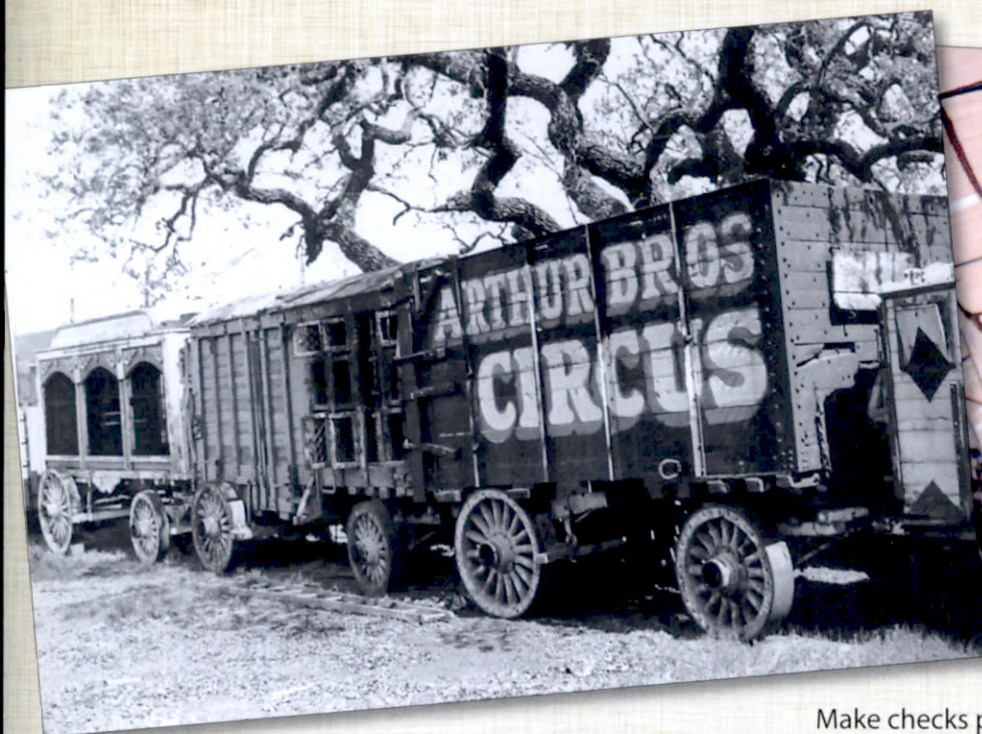
In 1951 and 1952 Georgia was back on Cole Bros. at the Chicago Stadium. In 1952 she was in the aerial ballet. Soon after that she was working at the Coffee Shop in Huron, South Dakota. In 1953 she was employed as a waitress at the Marvin Hughitt Hotel.

Georgia Sweet, born in 1896, passed away in 1997 at the age of 101. She was buried in Huron, South Dakota. **Bw**



Sweet's tombstone in Huron, South Dakota.

***The Circus Historical Society proudly presents
the Richard and Albert Conover Photographic Collection***



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MEMORIES OF OLD CIRCUS DAYS

ONE RING AFFAIRS OF 45 YEARS AGO HAVE GIVEN WAY TO GIGANTIC TENT DISPLAYS

by George M. Hodge

This article, originally run in The Show World - The Twentieth Century Amusement Weekly (Vol. I, No. 16 October 12, 1907) p.5, was shared by Maureen Brunsdale. It was discovered in the collection of the Milner Library and offers a unique first hand opinion of some of the highlights of the American circus in the late 19th century. Annotations were compiled by Fred Dahlinger, Jr.

There is as much difference between the circus of today and the circus of forty-five years ago as there is between a string of Pullman cars and a broken down road wagon.

In the years ago the circus was not the grand aggregation of capital and arenic talent that it is today. Like everything else, the circus has improved and forged forward until now it represents the wealthiest, the most stupendous and most popular form of worldly amusement.

From a small one-ring and a two-pole tent affair it has grown to a dazzling, gigantic and rich display of the earth's greatest features. The circus of today is as far ahead of the circus of forty-five years ago as a mountain peak is above the valley. There is absolutely no comparison.

There are worlds of pleasure in the latter day circus, but not a whit more than there was in the humble one-ring affairs in the good old days of long ago when John Robinson, Dan Costilla¹, Dan Rice, Charley Noyes, James Robinson, Charley Stickney and Orton Bros. toured the country in wagons. Circus day then meant far more than it does now-a-holiday for white and black, and the boys saved up their pennies and five-cent pieces for weeks in order to enjoy the day and see all the bewildering sights.

Boy's Delight to Greet

The small boy of long ago climbed from his bed before daybreak in order to be on hand to greet the circus and follow the elephants to the show lot. It would be known on

*New York Circus herald printed in 1869.
The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection*

NEW YORK CIRCUS

From Hippodrome Iron Buildings, Nos. 86, 88, 90, 92 & 94 Fourteenth Street, up, Academy of Music, New York City.

L. B. LENT,

DIRECTOR.

Will Exhibit in NEW BEDFORD, on POPE'S ISLAND, on

MONDAY, July 5,

THREE PERFORMANCES

Will be given, commencing at 11 A. M.; 2 1-2 and 7 1-2 P. M.

The MORNING PERFORMANCE is particularly recommended to Ladies, Family Parties, and others desirous of avoiding a crowd.

TICKETS may be procured in advance at E. Thornton's Drug Store, cor. Purchase & Union Sts., without extra charge.

FREE BRIDGE!---

For the accommodation of their patrons, the management have made a contract by which Visitors going to and from the Circus will be passed over the Bridge **FREE OF TOLL.**

This Celebrated Metropolitan Troupe

Which has been established for years in New York, and is THE ONLY CIRCUS which has ever secured a permanent footing among the regular places of amusement in that city, is now on the Grand Summer Excursion through the country, and the Management takes great satisfaction in announcing that by the introduction of

NEW AND BRILLIANT FEATURES!

AND THE ENGAGEMENT OF

NEW AND CELEBRATED ARTISTS,

It has been enabled to prepare a NEW PROGRAMME OF PERFORMANCES for the present season which will be found in all respects

Far More Novel, Diversified and Attractive

Than any similar exhibition hitherto presented to the American public.

THE ENTIRE PRESS OF NEW YORK,

As well as the leading journals of every city which the NEW YORK CIRCUS has ever visited, have concurred in pronouncing this establishment the finest organization of the kind on this continent, and with the

INCREASED ATTRACTIONS!

Provided for the present tour, it is confidently asserted as beyond the power of contradiction that the entertainment presented at every exhibition are positively

UNEQUALED IN ALL THE WORLD.

An assertion which will be fully corroborated by every one who has had an opportunity of visiting the Circus of Paris and other European Cities.



THE ENTIRE MAMMOTH COMPANY!

From the New York Circus Building in Fourteenth Street, will appear BOTH AFTERNOON AND EVENING in

THE GRANDEST EXPOSITION OF

DARING BAREBACK RIDING!

WONDERS OF ATHLETIC SKILL!

Ever Witnessed in America, while novel and interesting exhibitions of sagacity and training by an unequalled collection of

Highly Trained Performing Horses, Ponies, Dogs and Mules,

WILL ADD TO THE INTEREST OF THE ENTERTAINMENTS, WHICH WILL INCLUDE

MORE and BETTER ACTS

Than were ever given, or can be given, by any other Circus in existence, introducing

A Better Company of Dashing Bareback Riders, Gymnasts, Clowns, Acrobats, Equilibrists, Contortionists and Voltigeurs than can be found in Paris, London, St. Petersburg, or any of the Great Cities of Europe.

The names of the principal performers have been given in bills already extensively circulated, and want of space prevents their repetition here; it is sufficient to state that NO CIRCUS IN THE WORLD CAN PRODUCE IN ONE COMPANY THREE SUCH ARTISTS AS

THE GREAT MELVILLE!

Mlle CAROLINE ROLLAND!

AND

ROBERT STICKNEY!

The THREE LEADING BAREBACK RIDERS of this establishment, while in every department of Equestrian and Acrobatic Art the various positions are filled by a COMBINATION OF ACKNOWLEDGED STARS UNPARALLELED IN EUROPE OR AMERICA.

SPECIAL NOTICE.—In order to prevent misapprehension it is deemed proper to state that THERE IS BUT ONE NEW YORK CIRCUS, which has NO BRANCHES, and L. B. LENT, the Director, is interested in no other establishment. Further, that the New York Circus, which is permanently located in Fourteenth Street, is THE ONLY CIRCUS that is in any way recognized as a New York institution in that city, and that it occupies the only building in America built and occupied exclusively for equestrian performances. These statements are made in consequence of persistent misrepresentations by interested parties. No guilty, tinsel show is to be all that is represented in the bills and advertisements. But for the purpose of giving the public an opportunity of seeing the collection of horses together they will parade the principal Streets on the morning of the day of exhibition, headed by a light Band Carriage containing PROF. CHARLES BOSWOLD'S NEW YORK OPERA BAND. The same attention to the requirements of REFINEMENT AND GOOD TASTE which has characterized the entertainments of this troupe heretofore, and which in New York has resulted in placing the New York Circus among THE MOST FASHIONABLE OF POPULAR RESORTS, will be fully maintained. NO CATCH-PENNY SIDE SHOWS or outside followers are tolerated, but within and without the Pavilion everything will be conducted with a strict regard to the rules of decorum and propriety. In short, all that careful management, lavish expenditure and untiring exertion can accomplish will be done to maintain the reputation which the New York Circus has fairly won—that of being

The Best Circus in the World

ADMISSION : : 50 Cents. Children under 10 Years of age, 25 Cents.

which country road the circus would enter the town, and out on that road the boys and enthused grown-ups would tramp, walking miles and miles to meet the caravan of red-topped wagons, iron-barred cages and the gilded band wagon, called "Cleopatra's Chariot." No sun was too hot, no road or weather too rough to keep the boys from making this tramp. No matter if they did have stone bruises on their feet or had stubbed toes tied up in rags, they would limp along the country road until the vanguard of the circus was met, and then their happiness had reached its zenith; and should there be a single elephant and a pair of dromedaries or camels in the cortege, heaven itself had no charms for the small boy at the moment, as did the circus! No other thought flashed o'er their menial sky. Dinner was forgotten, home was forgotten, sore toes forgotten—everything passed into oblivion as feasting eyes gazed steadily and long upon the red wagons, the gilded chariot and the lone elephant and dusty camel.

Ah, how sweet to hear the old folks tell of those golden days! How it makes one's heart long for the old times. What a pity that all could not have lived in that hour, could not have walked that country road, limping with a stone bruised heel, as the glorious sun broke out of the east and sent its burnished rays across field, meadow and wood. How grand it must have been along that country road, the air redolent with fieldgrass and the early morning dew; the call of golden-throated birds in the shrubs that stood green and beautiful in the rail fence corners, and afar off the rumble of the circus caravan coming toward the town!

Do Some Circus Stunts

And when the boys met the first wagon! There was a shout, hats were thrown in the air, and one little fellow, happier than all the rest, turned a handspring on the dusty road and then proceeded to walk on his hands. He wanted the circus folk to know that he had talent; that he was no ordinary country boy.

Back to town would troop the boys, following along with the wagons and trying to engage the elephant trainer in conversation. All was excitement! And when at last the show lot was reached the boys began making themselves useful. They would bring water and work like dray horses in happy anticipation of being passed into the circus. And when the parade took place just before noon, if a boy could succeed in being engaged to lead a camel or ride one of the Shetland ponies in the procession, there was no king on earth ever so happy as he, and for weeks after the circus left town association with him was at a premium. He was the hero of the town and a bigger boy than the one who chewed tobacco and spit yellow. And even after the boy who rode in the circus procession grew to manhood he looked back and

C. W. Noyes herald printed by Public Ledger in 1869. Reverse seen on following page.

The Ringling Museum

GREAT FREE EXHIBITION OF C. W. NOYES' GREAT CIRCUS AND CARAVANSERA.



PROF. C. F. CLARKE



GRAND BALLOON ASCENSION
BY THE FEARLESS AND INDOMITABLE AERONAUT.

PROF. C. F. CLARKE

THE MOST EXPERIENCED AND SUCCESSFUL AERIAL NAVIGATOR IN AMERICA. To enhance the interest of this
FREE EXHIBITION, the Aeronaut will in his
FLIGHT TO THE CLOUDS!

EXECUTE A SERIES OF DARING
TRAPEZE PERFORMANCES



THE BEAUTIFUL AND ETHERIAL

MILLIE TURNOUR

THE
QUEEN OF THE AIR!

The epitome of grace, skill, daring and exquisite
symmetry will constitute one of the rare features
of the comprehensive exhibition. In Europe,
America and the Antilles, this

FAIR AND LOVELY SYLPH

Is acknowledged to be the most daring and accom-
plished performer that ever appeared upon the
Trapeze. She is absolutely without a
rival, not even excepting the
hitherto famous

HANLON BROS.



Bear in mind the Day and Date of Exhibition.

SEE OTHER SIDE.

C. W. NOYES'

CRESCENT CITY



CIRCUS

HIPPODROME

AND EGYPTIAN CARAVAN

C. W. NOYES,.....MANAGER
ROBT. McANLIS,.....Treasurer
T. W. POLAND,.....Equestrian Manager.

PROF. CHRIST. MERLIN,.....Leader of Orchestra
F. N. QUICK,.....General Agent
G. F. HEMMING,.....Contracting Agent

A GRAND FREE EXHIBITION

WILL BE PRESENTED EVERY DAY BY A

BALLOON ASCENSION!

IN WHICH THE CELEBRATED AND FEARLESS AERONAUT,

MR. C. F. CLARKE

WILL EXECUTE A SERIES OF AERIAL FEATS IN PRIGIOUS FLIGHT.

Look at the Array of Artists, Stars of the Crescent City Circus:

Mrs. C. W. NOYES

Has been Universally and Emphatically Pronounced
THE QUEEN OF THE MANAGE.

MILLIE TURNOUR!

The Beautiful Spanish Aerial Nymph.

MISS POLLY LEE

The Only Female in the United States that Performs the
JUGGLING ACT ON HORSEBACK.

Mr. FRED. BARCLAY

Is recognized as the most Accomplished and Fearless Bareback rider in America.
The special art of the WILD COYANER, made without a ring
in the World.

LESLIE BROTHERS

JOHN, LEWIS & FRED.
CHAMPION GYMNASTS OF AMERICA AND EUROPE.

WOODA COOK

The \$5000-Challenge Champion Somersault Rider
of the World.

EUGENE MARTINEZ

In his fearful and thrilling IMPALEMENT ACT, is recognized
as the Acme of Premontious Daring.

JAKE RILEO

The Great Chinese GROUND JUGGLER.

MISS JENNIE TURNOUR,

THE FAIRY EQUESTRIAN.

THE GREAT LEE FAMILY!

From California, comprising the following: U. H. LEE and WIFE, ROSA LEE, ARTHUR LEE, CHARLEY LEE and E. E. LEE,
Surpassing anything for talent ever presented in your city, or to the public eye. GYMNASTS, ACROBATS, CONTORTIONISTS,
TUMBLERS, CLOWNS, JUGGLERS, VAULTERS, EQUILIBRISTS AND ROPE WALKERS.

DR. JAS. L. THAYER

The Largest Clown in the World, and his Educated Mules, JANUARY and FEBRUARY,
AND THREE ORIGINAL CLOWNS REPRESENT THE COMIC ELEMENT.

A. F. AYMAR | E. H. LEEHMAN

THE FUNNY CLOWN.

THE CALIFORNIA CLOWN, and

JIMMY REYNOLDS,

The CLOWN OF THE PERIOD. Quaint, Quizzical, and Quizzical, constitute a trio of Wit and Humour such as never before have been
introduced in Whimsical Companionship.

Remember there will be TWO PERFORMANCES, Afternoon and Night
Doors open at 1 and 7 o'clock; Performance will commence one-half hour later.

pointed with pride to the happiest moment of his whole life
- the time when he rode in the grand parade.

But with time all things change. In this age, people expect more and are greater critics than they were in the 40's, especially as to circuses. What was marvelous then is commonplace now and the man who could turn a double forward flip-flap in those days was a greater wonder than any acrobat that a modern circus of today can produce.

First Bareback Rider

There are people living today and plenty of them who remember what a furor Jim Robinson created when he appeared as a bareback rider in the old John Robinson circus in the 60's. Up to that time Jim Robinson did his bareback act, which was the best in his day. Nearly all riding was on pads, the pads being nearly as broad as the democratic platform of today. Men and women danced and cut many capers on the pads, and did scores of things that would not be tolerated with a circus of today. The people went wild over the stunts, but when Jim Robinson appeared as the great and only bareback rider in the world, and picked up a hat from the ground as his horse loped around the ring, no conquering hero ever received such an ovation as he did. He was a bigger man in a small country town then than the president is in Washington today, and the man outside of a circus who had the honor of a speaking acquaintance with him was justified in snubbing former associates for a week after the circus left the town.

Another Famous Rider

Sam Rheinhart² was another favorite of the arena more than forty years ago. He traveled with the Charley Noyes circus which was the first to imitate the custom of open cages of wild animals in the morning parade. Noyes fell in love with Texas, deserted the circus business, ran a hotel for a long time in Dallas, and died in a town in the southwestern part of that state in the 70's.

Charley Noyes' wife was one of the most graceful women who ever rode in the grand entry of a circus. She was a daughter of Dr. Bochenstre of Girard, Pa., who fitted out more circuses than any other man in his time.^{3 4} Rheinhart, who was Noyes' premier feature, was the most graceful acrobat to be found in those days. His hoop leap has never been surpassed even by modern and highly trained talent. From a spring-board he would shoot upward twenty feet and through a paper hoop and turn a double flip-flap after he had passed through the hoop; then he would go to the dressing room and tank up until it was time to get ready for the night performance. This was all Rheinhart did in the show - this one stunt twice a day, for which he received the sum of \$100 weekly, a princely purse in those days. The man who could now do Rheinhart's act as gracefully as he did would have no trouble in receiving \$1,000 per week.

Cook a Dating Rider

Another great artist in his day was Wooda Cook. He also traveled with the Noyes outfit, as well as with the Robinson show. Next to Jim Robinson he was the most daring horseback rider in the profession. Old canvasmen with the larger circuses now in the United States can be found who will swear that Wooda Cook's ring performance was the greatest ever seen on this continent. They argue that nothing like it has ever been shown with the more modern circuses.

There was a vast difference in Robinson and Cook. The latter never touched intoxicants, while Jim Robinson frequently had to be pulled out of saloons to get ready for the matinee. Cook was a favorite until he met another bright light in the sawdust ring, M'lle Tournour, whom he induced to leave her mother in Jefferson, Texas, and flee with him to Shreveport, La., where they were married. M'lle Tournour proved to be the best aerial performer in the business at that time, but after she met and married Cook the two were so wrapped up in each other that they neglected practice and soon ceased to be favorites. M'lle grew stout and got lazy and that was the end of them. Cook is still living somewhere out west, but his wife died several years ago.

First With Two Clowns

The old John Robinson show was the first to ever tour the Southern states and have two clowns to romp in the ring and tickle the public's fancy. The first appearance of two clowns was a great and interesting feature, and the fact was heralded near and far. One clown forty years ago was all the people expected. An extra one was a pleasure they had never dreamed about. The clown was a star character with the olden circus and his witty sayings were quoted until the circus came a year later. The tilts between the clown or clowns and the ring master, who was costumed then like a brigadier general with ostrich plumes in his hat, were main features of the whole show, and people never grew tired of telling of what a fine clown the circus had.

Dan Rice, happy Dan, was the one shining light in the eyes of the old-time Southern folk as a clown. He was considered the funniest fellow ever donning a polka dot clown suit and wearing a pointed felt cap. Dan Rice's songs were sung the country over and his ring jokes went the rounds year in and year out. Rice was a gentleman and appealed to the women and children. He was noted for being a regular Chesterfield in his manners and made thousands of friends all over the South and Southwest.

Desire a Free Pass

To get into a circus tent without paying has been a weakness with some people ever since the circus was invented.

The Great Eastern and Robinson's Champion Circus herald printed by Torrey Bros. in 1874. Reverse seen on following page.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



A VULCAN IN POWER AND STRENGTH!

The management of these great shows, understanding the public's wish for extraordinary situations in amusements, and recognizing the necessity of the extreme hard times, at great pecuniary sacrifice and for this colossal enterprise, have consolidated in one grand aggregation

The Great Eastern

MENAGERIE, MUSEUM, AVIARY, Hippodrome and Egyptian Caravan AND ROBINSON'S CHAMPION CIRCUS

With their Colossal Menageries, World-famed Hippodromes, monster Caravans, enlarged Museum, beautiful Aviary, and Robinson's Unequaled Army of Male and Female Bareback Riders, Gymnasts, Acrobats, Follies, etc., and the great Riding Dog, "Pill Sheridan," and the trained team, "Buffalo Bill." Through this alliance is formed only with enormous expense, producing the *Grandest Constellation of Attractions on Earth*, one price of admission is charged for the entire avalanche of entertainments. The sound of the approach of this monarch spreads consternation among smaller concerns, which flee from its route as chaff before the wind.

First Time, in Four Years, of the World's Favorite and Undisputed Champion.

JAS. ROBINSON

The most brilliant, daring and daring bareback rider living. His feats of heroism have startled the whole population of both continents, and as eloquent proof of their appreciation, the crowned heads of Europe have showered upon him their titles. Medals, diamonds-encrusted belts and trophies, the real value of which is more than the classic cost of half the show itself. These honors which have been conferred upon him by Queen Victoria, Queen of England, Napoleon III, late Emperor of France, William, Emperor of Germany, Prince of Orange, of Holland, Queen Isabella II, late of Spain, Captain General Doria, of Cuba, Sultan of Turkey and son, King and Queen of Greece and King of Portugal.

Behold the Dazzling Record which shines with the effulgent brilliancy of the Noonday Sun.

James Robinson, and his sons Clarence and Eugene,

A famous one, the world's most famous, is given to the use of any active youth preference in the United States. Mr. ROBINSON is invited to appear in this season with the first Eastern, only to add new and greater renown to his famous name, side by side the best known on earth. In the prime of life and in the full vigor of well sustained manhood, he risks better than ever before, exposing and even exposing himself.

The Double Arenic Company JAMES ROBINSON, AND HIS TALENTED SONS, Masters CLARENCE AND EUGENE.

The Management of this colossal enterprise will wage \$10,000 that Mr. Robinson has no equal on earth. \$1,000 is offered to be paid for the services of this most active performer in the United States.

DAVENPORT BROTHERS, greatest Gymnasts Living.

Master Clarence Robinson, Mast. Eugene

M'LE ARMSTRONG, WM. GORMAN,

Wm. Carroll, FRANK ASHTON,

MIACO BROTHERS, JOHN BATCHELLER,

TOM WATSON, FRED SYLVESTER,

C. H. Lowry, SPENCER and TUTTLE,

James Esler, Phil. SHERIDAN,

Four Great Clowns,

AL. MIACO, CARROLL, SYLVESTER and fun-making SAM McFLYNN.

M'les Sutti, Cornelia, Marguerite and Laura,

BRYANT, LINDSEY, DUNN, VILLIPIE, MCINTYRE, and an UNEQUALED CORPS

OF ARTISTS FROM BOTH CONTINENTS.

NEW CANVASES, NEW WARDROBE AND NEW PARAPHERNALIA, WITH 10 MASSIVE BRAN-NEW DENS OF WILD ANIMALS, JUST ADDED TO THE OLD AND FAVORITE COLLECTION. The whole undergrowth a LIGHTED CITY OF PAVILIONS, constructed in such a manner that the visitors can behold the grand display of Museum, Menagerie, Aviary and Caravan, without being compelled to witness the GRAND HIPPODROMATIC and CIRCUS PERFORMANCES; however, ONE TICKET admits the holder to all the COMBINED SHOWS.

At 9.30 o'clock, Every Day, a

Magnificent Street Pageant AND PROCESSION

Will occur, which will give the public some idea of the substantial merit of this really Greatest of all World's Fairs. Lions, Tigers, Panthers, Leopards, Elephants, Camels, Eels, Trained Ponies and Horses, will be seen in the gorgeous line of moving spectacle. A long and imposing array of Ladies and Gentlemen on horseback, Ensembles, Crinoline and Golden Vases, Dens and Tableau Cars, and an Elegant Cornet Band, drawn by a team of four thoroughbred horses in a glittering Chariot, the whole followed by the Musical Company, THE GREAT AND ONLY STEAM PIANO, the bewitching music of which can be heard for miles.

Torrey Brothers, Printers, 13 Spruce Street, New York. (See other side.)

DANBURY TUES. OCT 6

NO CHANGE OF DATES! • NO POSTPONEMENTS!

Beware of Deception! Subterfuge!

Beware of all shows that do not denounce in their published bills and programmes the awful evil of gambling, "three card monte men," and "dice boxes," so often found accompanying traveling caravans. THE GREAT EASTERN, at heavy expense, employs detectives, and will reward, in addition, all local officers who arrest and send to the conviction of such villainous law breakers.

CHASTE, MORAL, REFINED, NOVEL, AND COMPREHENSIVE!



Great Eastern & Jas. Robinson's

CONSOLIDATED SHOWS.

ROBINSON'S SIX BAREBACK RIDERS

20 Tumblers, 40 Gymnasts, & 30 Acrobats!

ACKNOWLEDGED KINGS OF THE ART ARENICO

STARTLING

RACING HIPPODROME!

MAGNIFICENT DUAL CIRCUS

Triple Museum, 2 Full Menageries

AND

LARGEST TRAVELING CARAVAN

EVER UNDER A CITY OF PAVILIONS, COVERING ACRES OF GROUND.

THE SUCCESSFUL

\$100,000 CHALLENGE SHOW!

\$20,000 The Great Eastern is the only show in the United States that performs more than 100 acts.

\$20,000 JAMES ROBINSON, the Champion Bareback Rider, with the Great Eastern, has no equal as an acrobat.

\$20,000 The Great Eastern was the first show that ever introduced two rings under the same canopy at the same time.

\$20,000 The JAMES ROBINSON, the chief of the champion bareback riders, bridge and cone, from the back of a 20 ft. horse, has no equal in any other living man on foot or saddle.

\$20,000 That James Robinson will give any horseman in the United States or Europe \$5,000 to accept his challenge, and the Great Eastern will pay \$10,000 to the party who will take the wager together. No show better, whether advertising in this or any other way, "Let the facts of facts write."

THE ONLY SHOW IN THE WORLD THAT RUNS THE WHOLE YEAR ROUND—NEVER LAYING UP FOR FANTASIES, HARD TIMES, OR FROM ANY CAUSE WHATSOEVER.

REMEMBER WE PERFORM ONLY AS ADVERTISED NEVER CHANGING OUR DAYS OR DATES.

The admission of the Press, the sale of all amusement lovers, the glory of the novel and respectable classes, the pride and heart of an enthusiastic public, the Colonel Great Eastern presents its triumphal way without a rival, a veritable giant whose victorious strides show all adventures. Rich with the wealth of accumulated success, give with its own perfection and unexcelled with the best of its kind, it is no marvel that the PEOPLE ARE ITS FRIENDS AND PATRONS.

A TOWERING GIANT AMONG ITS FELLOWS! Appointed, selected, and celebrated in FOUR TIMES THE SIZE OF LAST YEAR, presenting New Attractions, Extraordinary Novelties, at once placing it beyond all Parallel in Amusement History, THE GREATEST SHOW IN THE WORLD.

The STUPENDOUS MENAGERIE

Abounds with new importations from the Natural Kingdom, presenting the Greatest Congress of Animals, Birds and Reptiles ever on Exhibition in America, successfully rivaling the combined entertainment of any Four of the most Gigantic Establishments of Europe.

THE AVIARY AND MUSEUM DEPARTMENTS

Are the most Brilliant, Illustrated and Complete found in the United States, or on either Continent, fitting the Press and Public to realize THE GREAT EASTERN the most Perfect, Instructional, Attractive, and Magnificent Consolidation of the Circus.

THE GREAT MORAL SHOW OF THE AGE!

New Faces, New Features, Spectacularly Illustrated Horse, and Thrilling Acrobatic and Equestrian novelties will be witnessed in the Circus Arena, opening in Grandeur and Splendor the Glorious Theatre of America's Fame, or the Oriental City of the East. Sporting Equitation, Horseman's Points of Strength, Stunts of German or English, Tumbling and Acrobatics, Entertained with Jests, Songs, and Story, only give intimation of a few of the thousand and one spectacles of this most Chaste, Moral, Charming, and Magnificent Exhibition of modern times.



At a cost of over \$20,000, the Greatest Musical Curiosity ever produced has been added, the most and best.

STEAM-PIANO!

The exciting music of which can be heard miles, creating in harmony the notes of the organ. The melody is evoked by steam, and has no equal in the exhibition and favorable comment of the entire world of music. PROF. GEORGE PALMER, after years of close study and successful experiments, has brought this powerful instrument to the present satisfactory perfection.

THE GORGEOUS

STREET PAGEANT!

Conducted by Joe Kinslow's Splendid Brass and Reed Band, Of Eighteen Performers, will cover daily at 9:30 o'clock A. M.

ONE THOUSAND RESERVED CHAIRS FOR LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!



Notwithstanding the magnitude of the GREAT EASTERN and ROBINSON'S CONSOLIDATED SHOWS, THE PRICE WILL REMAIN AS USUAL. No shaking allowed inside the Pavilion, and the best of order preserved. Doors open at 1 and 7 o'clock P. M., And the Acrobatic performance, commencing with the ORIENTAL GRAND PARADE ENTREE! Led by MR. JAS. ROBINSON in person one hour afterwards.



Look out for the Route of the Procession, a moving line of Crispen and Golden Splendor, on the morning of the arrival, through the principal Avenues and Streets of the City.

Men have been known to spend \$5 "settin' 'em up" to circus employees just to get a free ticket to the show when the price of admission was only 50 cents, and there are still people of this kind everywhere. They take great pride in telling their friends and acquaintances that "it didn't cost them anything to go into the show," and a boy would risk having his hide tanned by a canvasman by crawling under the side walls and then hardly dared breathe for ten minutes for fear he would get caught and "turned out." Boys sneak under the canvas now, but there isn't that thrill attending it that there was in the days of long, long ago. At least, those boys who tried it and who are now men with the frosts of many winters resting upon their hair, say so.

But a circus is a circus, and it will always be a circus, and the biggest drawing card in the world. The smell of the sawdust, the "whoop-la!" of the riders and the "this way ladies an' gentleman," will have a fascination for mankind as long as mankind is. There is an aroma about the circus tent, a charm in the circus lemonade and music, in the foghorn voices of the side-show barkers that will attract people even when church bells are calling them to worship. **Bw**

End Notes

1. Dan Castello, not Costilla
2. Sam Rinehart, not Rheinhardt
3. There is no hard evidence of a Dr. Bochenstre in Girard, PA, nor is one mentioned by David Carlyon in relation to Dan Rice, Girard's most prominent circus man. There was an Ed Backensto[s]e around various shows, 40-horse driver and more, and the name was spelled differently just about every season.
4. According to an 1879 biography, Charles W. "Charlie" Noyes (1832-1885) was married to a [younger] daughter of Agrippa D. Martin, the trainer and handler of the elephant "Hannibal." [Clipper, December 13, 1879, p300.] Her name wasn't given and if she were a great rider it likely would have been mentioned in a bio or obit somewhere. Noyes's one-time partner, Dr. James L. Thayer (1830-1892), was married to Martin's eldest daughter, Helen, on April 3, 1860, per Slout. Presumably they were brothers-in-law, unless marriage status changed, somewhat explaining their partnership in 1862-1869. This is verified by Al G. Field, in his book, where he wrote: "As the Thayer & Noyes Circus was one of the best, Alfred [G. Field] has always considered his engagement with that concern as the beginning of his professional career. Dr. James L. Thayer and his family were highly connected. Mr. Noyes married the sister of his partner's wife. The families did not agree and this led to a separation of the partners, disastrous to both." <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20375/20375-h/20375-h.htm>

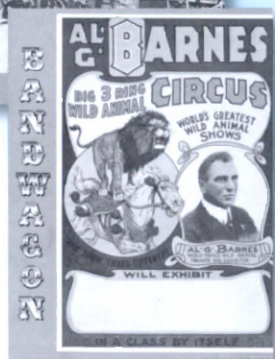
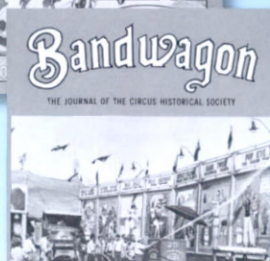
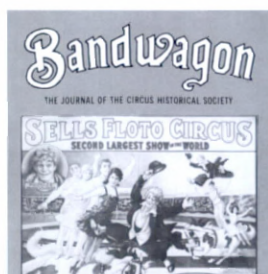
Noyes' 1885 obituary declared that he was married to Mlle. Josephine, but gives no last name, saying only that she was a daughter of Mme. Tournour, the French equestrienne. It simply says she was prominent in the ring 12-15 years earlier, which would be 1870-1873. [Clipper, November 21, 1885, p564.] This appears to be an error.

Tournour could be a misspelling of Tournaire, as in Louise Tournaire. She had a daughter, Josephine Tournaire (-1920), active 1850-1892 (per Draper), wife of James De Mott (1838-1902). But, unless they divorced, then Noyes cannot be a second husband.

Mlle. Josephine Tournour comes up as Josephine Tournour De Mott, aka Josie De Mott. There is no documentation to indicate that Josie De Mott (1868-1948, Slout has it in error as c1870-1920) was married to Noyes, who was 46 years her senior. Slout wrote of her 1889 marriage to a grifter, which was annulled, followed by marriage to Charles M. Robinson in 1890.

So, at present, there's no clarity on the accuracy of Hodges statement, other than to assume that both he and Noyes's 1885 obituary are wrong and that Noyes was married to the sister of Dr. James L. Thayer's wife, a daughter of Agrippa Martin.

She may have been a rider, at least that's the way that Slout interpreted an entry about Mrs. Charles Noyes in the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, 1870, as related in *Olympians*. Another source gave her name as Nellie, married to Noyes, and "famous in her day as one of the most daring and skillful horsewomen in America." [John C. Kunz, "Agrippa Martin, The Man Who Trained the Treacherous Hannibal, *Bandwagon*, January 1954, 3-5]. Mrs. Charles Noyes was born Nellie Martin, daughter of elephant man Agrippa Martin, a c1870 rider of some merit.



For a limited time only the Circus Historical Society is offering all six 1980 *Bandwagons* as a group for \$25.00, about half the listed price.

In 1980 *Bandwagon* published articles on the Sells-Floto Circus, Mack Bull Dogs, Trade Cards, Fred Buchanan Railroad Circus, Cole Bros. circus and its winter quarters, Victoria Codona, class distinctions in early circus audiences, and the 1924 John Robinson Circus. Also included were reviews of the previous circus season, reproductions of circus letterheads, and more.

Joseph T. Bradbury, Fred D. Pfening, Jr., Fred D. Pfening III, Greg Parkinson, Chang Reynolds and Stuart Thayer were among the authors.

A complete listing of articles from 1980 can be found in the *Bandwagon* index on the CHS website at circushistory.org

\$25.00 includes shipping and handling in the U.S.

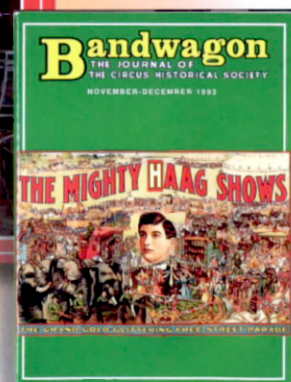
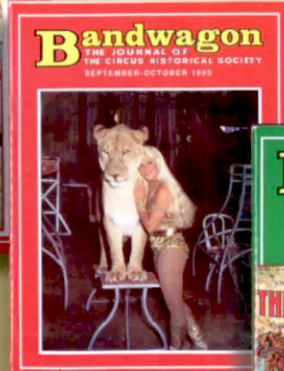
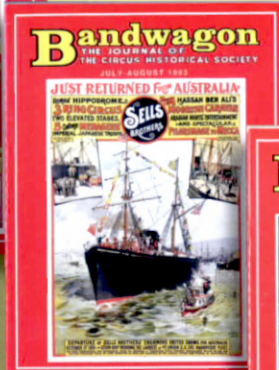
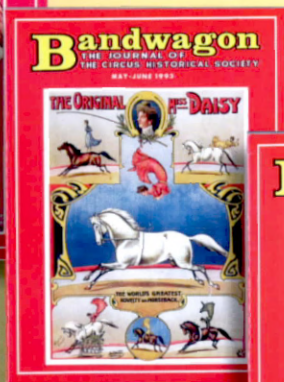
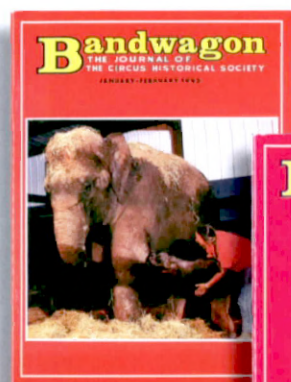
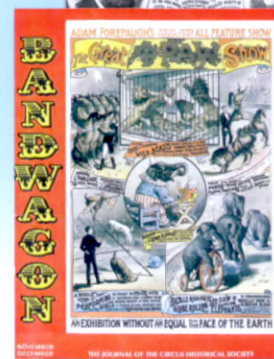
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For a limited time only the Circus Historical Society is offering all six 1993 *Bandwagons* as a group for \$25.00, about half the listed price.

In 1993 *Bandwagon* published articles on Hoxie Tucker, tough elephants, Miles White, Ringling Bros. in 1890-1891 and 1913, the Hodgini family, the United Nations Circus, Pat White, a review of the 1992 circus season, and many other subjects.

Fred Pfening, Jr., Joe Bradbury, Orin King, Stuart Thayer, Fred Pfening III, Richard Reynolds III, Dan Draper, Ernest Albrecht, Robert Kitchen and Fred Dahlinger, Jr. were among the authors.

A complete listing of articles and authors can be found in the *Bandwagon* index on the CHS website <http://www.circushistory.org/>

\$25.00 Includes shipping and handling in the US!

Make check payable to CHS and mail to: Bandwagon 1993 Special, 1075 W. Fifth Avenue, Columbus, Ohio 43212, or use PayPal on the CHS website at www.circushistory.org



GREER'S SOCIETY CIRCUS AND WILD WEST

Permanent Address Bloomington, Wis.

12 People 22 Horses and Mules 10 Acts

The First National Bank Martinsville, Illinois

December 7, 1920.
At the Clark County Fair held at Martinsville, Illinois, this fall, Greer's Society Circus and Wild West was the main free attraction.

We are pleased to say that we were more than satisfied with the performance. Mr. Greer and his company have an excellent attraction, they are tireless workers, and take care of themselves during the time when fair officials are occupied with so many other duties.

If more attractions came up to the standard set by Greer, the task of selecting acts for fairs etc. would be a pleasure.

Yours very truly,
THE CLARK COUNTY FAIR ASSN.,
J. I. Brydon, Treasurer.

South Florida Fair and Gasparilla Carnival Tampa, Florida

February 18, 1922.

Greer's Society Circus,
Bloomington, Wis.

Dear Mr. Greer:—

At a special meeting of the Directors of the South Florida Fair, held Tuesday, February 14, 1922, a resolution was unanimously passed, authorizing me to convey by letter their appreciation of the high class manner in which you handled your free act program during the period of the South Florida Fair and Gasparilla Carnival, February 2 to 11, 1922; consisting of high-school, and high-jumping horses, bucking and comedy mules, trick riding and rope spinning, bucking horses, and relay races, and the extraordinary feat of your wonderful horse known as "Over the Top," daily jumping over an automobile with passengers.

We do not hesitate in recommending "Greer's Society Circus and Wild West," to any Fair Association or anyone that might be interested, and you may figure on a re-engagement at the South Florida Fair to be held in February, 1923.

Thanking you for your interest in making the 1922 South Florida Fair and Gasparilla Carnival the biggest and best in its history, we are,
Yours truly,

SOUTH FLORIDA FAIR and
GASPARILLA CARNIVAL,
P. T. Strieder, General Manager.

Bloomington, Wis. 3/9.

Mr. W. P. Hall.

Dear Sir:

Do you know anyone that would be interested in a pair of real good small mules, I want to sell the little spotted mule you traded me and she is the best buckee and kicker in the business. Also have a very fine hurdle mule - 6 years old, weight about 550 and a very strong made mule.

I want 125 apiece and will guarantee them. Am going on the Sells Bros Show and they will carry them for me.

Adam was well pleased with the 14 horses I got, they worked in fine.

If I can do you any good at any time I will be glad to do so. Yours truly,
Joe R. Greer.



JOSEPH GREER

SUPER SHOWMAN

By John Daniel Draper

The images accompanying this article reproduce a speciality, multi-page letterhead used by Greer's Society Circus and Wild West in 1923. This copy, which includes a letter from Greer to showman William P. Hall, is part of the collection at Circus World Museum.

"Joe Greer, a Bloomington, Wisconsin, boy, was always interested in horses. I first met Joe when I showed in the Sprague and Hatch Opera House one week in the early 1900's. Joe was trading horses and began to wear a ten-gallon hat. In time he adopted the name of Silver Joe, which became the name of his Wild West venture at the county fairs. In a few years he ventured to furnish the concert features for a new circus with an old title, Coop & Lent Circus. It opened at Chicago, but it rained and rained and the show closed in a short time. There was no money but Joe was given a large Rhesus monkey as payoff and he and his cowboys rode over land horseback to Bloomington. With my little wagon show I was moving from Burton to Rockville. Early one morning, I perched high atop a wagon and saw 3 cowboys, each on a horse, and a large monkey on another horse coming my way. We all stopped. Joe told of their circus trouble, but bragged of his big trained monkey, which he put through some wonderful tricks. I bought the vicious old monkey for fifty dollars to put in a cage with a female monkey." This description of the talented showman Joseph Greer was recounted by Frank H. Thompson, proprietor of a small wagon show in Wisconsin, in an article published in the *Grant County Herald* of Lancaster, Wisconsin on November 11, 1959.

Known for his Wild West displays and for his exceptional skills at training horses, Joe Greer worked some of the biggest shows of the early 20th century. Joined by first his wife and later their son, Joe Greer trained and presented horses for almost thirty-five years. The following account is a thorough survey of Greer's long and remarkable career in traveling entertainment.

Joe Greer's birth date is given as October 20, 1883. His

youth was spent in Bloomington, where he eventually established his permanent residency. A girl from Bagley, in the same county, Edna May Trine, became his wife. Their son, Harry, was born in 1905. He was literally "raised on a horse."

In 1912 the Greers organized their own Society Circus, using a tent. They started their Wild West show in 1913.

In July 1915, the Greers partnered with someone named Cannon, presenting Greer & Cannon's Wild West and Trained Animal Show at Lancaster, WI, probably in front of a grandstand or in an open field. Prof. Cannon had the "\$10,000 Troupe of Educated Ponies in Military Drills," as well as trained goats, a mule, and a pony. Bingo, the clown, added a circus feeling to the presentation.

Silver Joe had his Wild West riders on Coop & Lent Circus in 1916. In display #13, Mrs. Art Eldridge rode a manege act and Greer's three horses appeared, as did Rhoda Royal's high school horses. Display #20 was a mule hurdle act. The next year on the same circus in display #4, a statutory posing act was featured with beautiful horses worked by Etta Meyers and Mrs. Greer. Display #8 had manege horses worked by Etta Meyers, Mrs. Greer, and Ethel Shafer.

In 1918 the Greers were on the Walter L. Main Circus. Mrs. Greer was in one of two horse posing acts and she and Joe rode manege. Mrs. Greer also was one of four iron jaw performers. On the track Joe Greer rode the leaping horse "Caesar." He also furnished the high school and the jumping horses for the show and had the Wild West concert. In November, Barney Demarest's two-car show bought a standard bred trotting mare, "Sunshine," from Joe Greer to be used in the 1919 Demarest program. This horse had been ridden in 1918 on the Walter L. Main Circus by Etta Meyers. Demarest Bros.' Circus and Wild West Shows Combined also purchased five black stallions for high school and liberty acts from John Werner.

Silver Joe Greer contracted with Sparks circus to present Col. Joe Greer's Wild West. The Greer family, Joe, Harry,

and Edna were three of the ten riders. In 1921 Joe had the Wild West on Howes Great London Circus. It was made up of Joe and Edna Greer, Harry Greer, Carlos and Etta Carreon, Bill Mossman, and Frank Scott. The manege riders were Joe and Edna Greer, Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Clark, Miss La Belle Clark, Miss Hickey, Miss Northrup, Miss Daily, Miss Burns, Ray Thompson, Charles Berry, Mr. Sabel, and Frank B. Miller. Joe Greer, Ray Thompson, Etta Corrigan, Hazel Hickey, Nellie Roth, and Charles Barry rode the jumping horses over the high hurdles. The rope spinners were Carlos Carreon, Joe Greer, and Bill Mossman. Carlos Carreon and Joe Greer were spinning 90-foot loops. Joe Greer did a six horse catch. Trick riding was done by Bill Mossman, Harry Greer, and Mrs. Carlos Carreon and bronco riding by Bill Mossman and Carlos and Etta Carreon.

In 1922 Joe Greer shared the season between Gollmar Bros. Circus and John Robinson's Circus.

On Gollmar Bros. Display #3 featured Blanche Reed and Mrs. William DeMott in the ladies principal act. In display #12 were Joe Greer's jumping horses with Hazel Hickey and Joe Greer as riders. Silver Joe Greer's Wild West included Joe and his wife, Jim and Hatty Carey, Harry Greer, Miss Butler, Wyoming John Snyder, F. Scott, and Joe Rodericoquis. John Robinson's display #15, the manege, had Victor and Madame Bedini in the rings. On the track were Nettie Dill, John Smith, Slivers with the mule "Maud," Joe Bowers, Edna May Greer, Tetu Harriman, Oneida Nelson, Irene Montgomery, Ruby Chapin, Theol and Hilda Nelson, and the high jumping horses of Joseph Greer and Company. In display #16 there were Bernie Griggs, William Ashton & Co., Fred Nelson & Co., and Joe Greer in comedy mule numbers. The Wild West lineup consisted of Joe Greer, Carlos and Etta Carreon, Tom and Emma Hitt, Bill Malton, Ed. Miller, and Mark Harmon, Jr.

On Sells-Floto in 1923 the big acts included Joe Greer's five high jumping horses, the Flying Wards, Joe Hodgini comedy riders, Fred Collier's big trained white horse act, Irene Ledgett and Erma Ward, gymnastic aerialist. The after show, under Manager Joe Greer, included Fred Collier, Art Boden and his wife, David Nemo, Bill Mossman, Harry Greer, Ed Miller, Percy Moore, Frank Orlando, Juanita Lopez, Ethel Morse, Mrs. Jim Williams, Calif. Cotton, Tom Martin, Cuban Mack, Joe Lewis, Bill Lorette, and Bill Carress.

During this period from 1922 to 1924 "Greer's World's Champion Horses" and "Harry Greer's Hippodrome and Wild West" were busy in the off-season bringing entertainment to audiences at many locations. Among those were events at: Bangor, Maine; Hammond, Louisiana; Ottawa, Canada; South Florida Fair and Gasparilla Carnival at Tampa, Florida; Montgomery, Alabama; Martinsville, Illinois; Richmond Parish Fair at Rayville, Louisiana;

South Louisiana Fair Association at Donaldsonville; and The Great Kewanee Fair at Kewanee, Illinois.

Joe Greer with his troupe of ten persons and seventeen horses received a temporary release from his regular circus season to put on his show. All of his acts were of a high order and entertained the spectators to the utmost. His company consisted of as fine a group of well-groomed horses as one would wish to see, well ridden by riders of both sexes. A



"Over the Top" clearing at 6½-foot bar

We have furnished acts for the following circuses:—

Coop & Lent's Circus,
Walter S. Main Circus,
Sparks Bros.' Circus,
Howe's Great London Shows,
Gollmar Bros.' Circus,
Yankee Robinson Circus.



Bill Mossman, World Renowned Trick and Fancy Rider

We Present T

- 1—Half-Mile Steep
- 2—High School Ho
- 3—Comedy Buckin
- 4—Trick and Fanc
- 5—Comedy Hurdle

A Complete

THE GREAT KEWANEE FAIR Kewanee, Illinois

Kewanee, Ill., Nov. 5, 1924
Mr. J. R. Greer, Proprietor and Manager,
Greer's Society Circus and Wild West,
Bloomington, Wisconsin.
Dear Mr. Greer:—

I think it is no more than proper that the Big Kewanee Fair Association extend to their thanks for the wonderful show that you gave us during our fair this year. At all times you were more than willing to readjust your acts so they would work in between heats the best advantage for all concerned.

I want to also congratulate you on the success you had in putting on your circus, for no one during the entire week did any of us hear a swear word or see any act of rowdiness. Your things were dragging and we had extra things you always came out and entertained the people, which was greatly appreciated by them and kept things booming.

In closing I wish to say that you gave more than we paid for and can recommend your circus to any fair that is looking for entertainment that pleases both old and young.

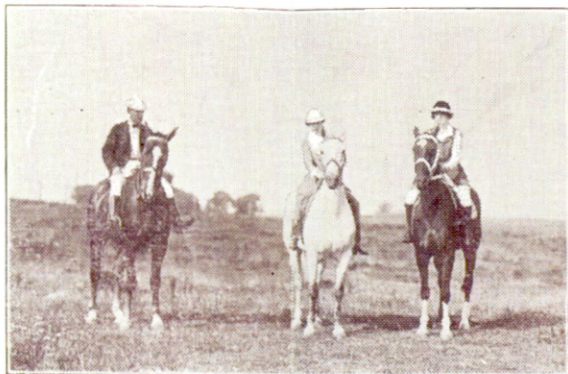
Yours truly,

WARREN T. HEAPS, M. D., President
Kewanee District Fair Association

Roman race as a half mile dash was staged with two cowboy riders each piloting pairs of horses. Each jockey stood up handling his pair as one horse. Another thrilling stunt put on by Greer was the jumping over an open Buick automobile loaded with five cowboys by an "Over The Top" high jumping horse. This horse was eventually sent over three standing horses. The liberty high jumping horse "Aviator" went over the hurdles at seven feet, six inches.

At the Tampa, Florida fair in February of 1923 Joe Greer's broad jumping horse, named "Atlas," made a jump of 28 feet. Performers with Greer at that time were Bill Mossman, Weaver Gray, Frank Scott, Harry Greer, Percy Moore. Harold Nicholson, Mrs. Ella Harris, Mrs. Edna Greer with Abe Goldstein, the clown.

The cowboys performed almost unbelievable feats of horsemanship, climaxing in passing entirely under the



Three of the Jumping Horses Used in Our Steeple Chase Races

The most versatile combination of acts playing Fairs in the United States today, combining quality, quantity and comedy.



"The Aviator," ridden by Miss Hazel Hickey, clearing a 6-foot bar

Ten Entirely Separate and Distinct Free Acts

plechase, five horses, ten jumps.
horse Act.
ng Mule.
y Riding.
s Mule.

- 6—Trick and Fancy Roping.
- 7—Riding Outlaw Bucking Horses.
- 8—Half-Mile Relay Race.
- 9—Roman Standing Races.
- 10—"Over the Top" Jumping Over an Automobile.

Afternoon's Entertainment For Your People

Gays Mills Fair, Gays Mills, Wisconsin

November 9, 1920
To Whom it May Concern:—The Greer show played our Fair dates this year and I take pleasure in recommending Mr. Greer and his shows. Mr. Greer's shows are refined and entertaining. The trick riding and roping done by his cowboys pleased our crowd greatly. We have known Mr. Greer for several years and we have always found him to be a man of his word and a fine gentleman to do business with.
Yours truly, T. N. NELSON,
Sec'y. Gays Mills Fair Assn.



Harry Greer, Trick and Fancy Roper and Rider



The Comedy Bucking Mule and the three Famous Clowns—Abe Goldstein, Harold Nicholson and Pick-Handle Butler

THE LEE COUNTY FAIR Amboy, Illinois

August 21, 1920.

To Whom It May Concern:—

This is to certify that "Greer's Society Circus and Wild West" played the Lee County Fair this season. I wish to say that Mr. Joe Greer is a gentleman in every respect, always keeps his word, is honest and trustworthy at all times. Mr. Greer, his wife and his employees were with us almost a week and we will certainly welcome them all back next year. His men are all clean, manly fellows and the show is run absolutely on the square. Mr. Greer furnished several free acts for us and they were the best our people ever witnessed in the way of trick riding etc. I can heartily recommend Mr. and Mrs. Greer and the employees of their show to anyone desiring their services for free acts. They are a credit in every way to any Fair.

Yours very truly,

WILLIAM L. LEECH, Secretary.

"Over the Top"

World's Champion High and Broad Jumping Horse



"Over the Top" jumps over any make of automobile, and over three saddle horses standing abreast. "Over the Top" holds the world's broad jumping record of 32 feet 8 inches, made at Tampa, Florida, February 14, 1922.

horse's body while running at full speed, changing from one side of the horse to the other without touching the ground, where an instant's slip would have meant broken legs or arms or even death. The trick roping, featuring Johnnie Rufus making an ocean wave jump through a catch and turning a complete somersault through the loop and catching a running horse by all four feet, is a number that will linger long in one's memory. Here were riders doing shoulder stands on fast running horses.

One of the most traditional Wild West acts was the steer bull-dogging event. With his helper to flush the steer and keep it running at top speed, the cowboy doing the bull-dogging rode alongside, leaned over in the saddle, took

the steer's horns with both hands, kicked his feet from the stirrups and dropped to the ground. This action had to be done while both the steer and the bulldogger were going at the highest possible speed. The steer had to be brought to a full stop and thrown. This action was a spectacular contest of strength between the cowboy and the wild steer. Also a most thrilling and spectacular contest was the riding of outlaw broncos by the cowboys.

For part of 1923 Joe Greer and his wife were on Sells-Floto Circus. From 1924 through 1926 and again in 1928 Joe was with Ringing Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows. For 1924 Harry Greer was on Cy Compton's Wild West with Ringling-Barnum. In February of 1925, Joe Greer had a big attraction with wonderful jumping horses at the Sarasota County Fair. The next month Bill Mossman did trick and fancy roping at the Tampa Fair under Joe's management. Others on the show were Harry Greer, Mr. and Mrs. Nemo, Jack Kirk, Harry Wilson and Harry Stevens.

E. W. Mahoney was the announcer. After resting up from the South Florida Fair at Tampa, Joe joined the Ringling Show where he put on a feature jumping horse number in the big show program. He furnished ten horses and riders for the display. For the past five years Joe Greer had specialized in jumpers and he collected and trained a wonderful array of equine talent. There were three horses that jumped over automobiles, one that jumped over three horses, seven that made six feet high jumps and three that jumped seven feet in height. A liberty jumper hurdled over four horses at each performance. In his group of long distance and high hurdle horses, one named "Silver" cleared six horses at a bound. America's champion riders of hurdling horses were Florence Mardo and Mary

Sutton. Harry Greer and Bill Mossman were the fastest trick riders under the big top.

On Saturday evening, April 10, 1926, Harry Greer and May Colleano of the Colleano family on Ringling-Barnum were married at the bride's family home in Brooklyn. Among those present were Mr. and Mrs. C. Colleano Sr., Mr. and Mrs. C. Colleano, Jr., Winnie, Con, Kate, Maurice, Joyce, Bebe, Lindsay, and George Colleano, Estrella, Carmencita, and Paul Nelson, Ethel Freeman, Mrs. Bruce and Vera (later wife of Alfredo Codona), Jimmie Reiffenach, and Harry Herzog.

The Greer's Wild West Circus was at Luna Park, Coney Island in 1926. It was made up of twenty people, twenty-four horses, six steers, and a band. John Rufus, trick roper, left Ringling-Barnum to join. Also present were Harry Greer, trick rider, and Harry Wilson, riding the high jumping horse "King Cole," which could clear seven feet six inches. Curley Stewart and Louise Orr were bronco riders. Also on the show was Albert Mann in trick riding, Eddie Harney on the kicking horse, Chick Hamman, Frank Johnson, Red Todd, Frank Scott, and Lewis Orr. A broad jumping horse cleared an automobile filled with passengers.

In May of 1927 Joe Greer was advertising for bronco riders, bull doggers, girl trick riders, and a clown for fifteen weeks of fair dates. In 1928 Greer's Western Rodeo and Society Circus was at the Ozaukee County Fair in Cedarburg, Wisconsin. In March of 1928, Greer left Tampa, Florida for his Wisconsin home with contracts for Greer's Society Circus to be at four Florida fairs for the next season. He planned to be at Tampa again in 1929 for his seventh consecutive year at the South Florida Fair. Other dates lined up for 1929 were at Orlando, DeLand, and Gainesville. In 1929, Fred Buchanan, proprietor of the Robbins Bros. Circus, bought Joe Greer's famous high and broad jumping horse "King Cole," being ridden by Jewell Jackson.

While Joe was with the Cy Compton Wild West on the Ringling show, Mrs. Greer worked high in the air in the butterfly display. She fell one day and sustained injuries from which she never fully recovered. Joe left the circus and next organized and managed a large rodeo for a few years. Later he sold his stock to Gene Autry and was elected sheriff of Grant County, Wisconsin in 1928. While Greer was sheriff, it was his practice to order two railroad cars of horses without even asking the price.

Edna May Greer, wife of Joe and mother of Harry E. Greer, died at the age of 43 on February 22nd, 1931 at Lancaster, Wisconsin. She had been in failing health since her fall on the Ringling Show. She had trouped with her husband since 1913, on Coop and Lent, Walter L. Main, Sparks, Howes Great London, Gollmar Bros., Sells-Floto, and Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circuses. She was survived by her husband and son, seven brothers and one sister. Burial was at Bloomington, Wisconsin.

Joe Greer continued as elected sheriff of Grant County. He and his son Harry were alternately elected to the two-term limit until Joe suffered a defeat in 1942. Joe was on the road when he was nominated for the first time and the flexibility of his position enabled him to engage in show-related activity during his tenure as the top county cop. In general, when he was sheriff, or overseeing his son as sheriff, his occupation kept him at home in Bloomington.

In 1939 Harry Greer was divorced from his wife, May. She as well as Harry had been trick and fancy riders and ropers in rodeo performances. The next year Harry Greer married Eileen Root on June 15th at Lancaster, Wisconsin.

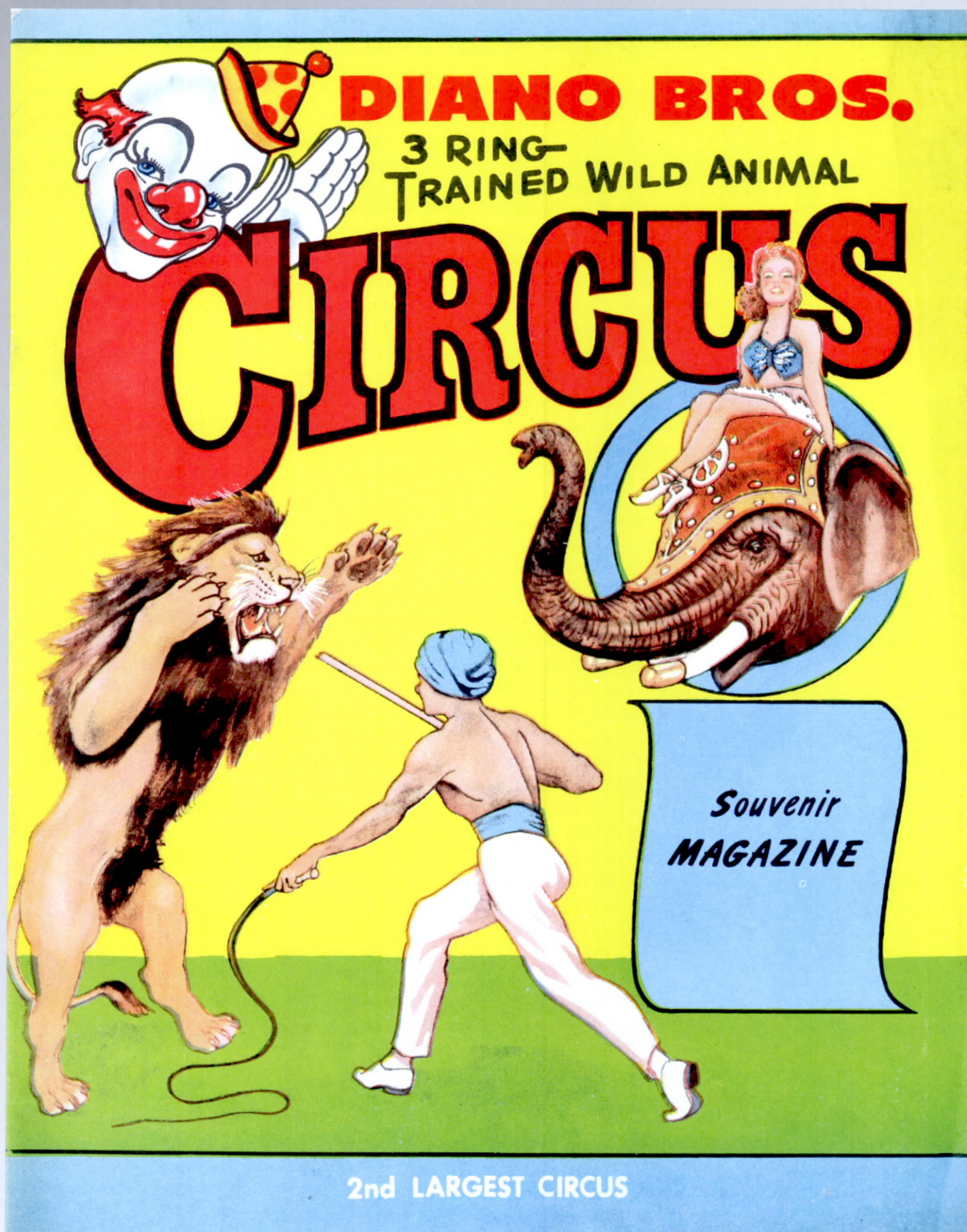
About this time Joe Greer was associated with someone named Hammer in Greer and Hammer's Rodeo.

By 1942 Joseph Greer was chiefly presenting some beautiful liberty horses which were brown and black quarter horses that Rudy Rudynoff had trained in Wisconsin. Harry Greer never presented the liberty horses, but he had a trick horse, Freckles, which was one that you rode over and under. Joe was on the Hamid-Morton Circus and on the Olympia Circus in 1942 and on Barnes Bros. from 1944 to 1946. In 1942 the Greer liberty horses were presented by William Bushbaum at the Minneapolis Zuhrah Temple Shrine Circus. The Greer manege and high school horses and the beautiful liberty horses were presented at the Rameses Temple Shrine Circus at Toronto, Canada by Capt. Greer. In 1942, Greer's famous liberty horses appeared as the Equine Paradox at the Olympia Circus at the Chicago Stadium and at the Aleppo Shrine Circus in Boston, Massachusetts. His manege horses and his liberty horses also were at the LuLu Temple Shrine Circus in Philadelphia in 1942.

The next year, 1943, he was at the Almas Temple Shrine Circus in Washington, D. C. That year he appeared at the Arab Temple Shrine Circus in Topeka, Kansas and the Wichita Police Circus with Hamid-Morton. In 1943 Joe Greer had his twelve beautiful horses at the Tripoli Temple Shrine Circus in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, under the sponsorship of producer Hamid-Morton.

In 1944 the liberty horse act was again presented by William Bushbaum at the Zuhrah Shrine Circus. Bushbaum also presented the group of twelve liberty horses at the Barnes Bros. Olympia Circus in the Chicago Stadium for the years 1944, 1945, and 1946. Joe Greer had horses on the Tom Packs Circus in 1944-1946.

Joe Greer, age 61 years, was killed in an auto accident on an icy road near Galena, Illinois on January 25th, 1946, while returning to his home in Lancaster, Wisconsin from a Shrine Circus booking at Detroit. At that time he was a rodeo producer and former Grant County, Wisconsin sheriff. His son, Harry, also active in show business, survived him. His death came just a few years after that of Tom Mix in a similar kind of vehicular mishap. **Bw**



Diano Bros. 1953 program

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Every journey has a secret destination of which the traveler is unaware. —M. Buber

A CIRCUS MEMOIR

by Leon J. Holecheck

Preface

Down through the years, people have asked the same questions: Did you really run away from home and join a circus? Were you an alligator-skinned boy on a carnival sideshow? When you learned how to eat fire, did you burn yourself? Some thoughtful people ask: What did your parents say when you quit school and joined the circus?

Now it's fifty years later, and I'm writing this memoir, partly to answer the questions, but mostly to remember. I do not pretend to be an expert on outdoor show business. My plan was to travel with the circus, live like a gypsy, make as much money as possible, and see America. It wasn't as easy as I thought it would be, but I was young, full of energy, and a romantic. Living conditions were spartan, at best. The formula for being a successful circus employee was being with it and/or it. I certainly was that. They called me Whitey because I was blond.

Libraries contain many children's books and biographies of famous performers and show owners. Most of them present the glamorous side of circus life; I hope to give a workingman's point of view. Travel with the circus turned out to be a hand-to-mouth exercise in self-preservation. Long hours of hard work and low wages were common, but I loved it and I survived. I didn't realize it at first, but I was falling in love with an institution: the American circus. It has always been an important part of America, and has remained an important part of my life.

Workmen were the unsung heroes of the circus, even though they got no applause and little pay. They were loyal and hard working under all kinds of adverse conditions.



The Pfening Archives

They rarely complained. Most of them loved the work and the constant travel. We set up and tore down every day. If the show stopped for any reason, money stopped coming in; then we would go broke, and everyone would be out of a job.

Eight years later, in the U. S. Army, I watched how they moved men and machines inefficiently. I was only a private, but if I could have, I would have taken the general to the circus so he could see how it was done.

I thought my job was hard until I learned about the owner's job. He was the general of the circus army. He had to be harsh, sometimes sympathetic, ruthless, but always wise. He was executive showman and psychiatrist combined. He was an optimist, a compulsive gambler, and a painstaking nitpicker. He understood the basics of survival and kept everything moving. Everyone respected him. Above all, he had to be dedicated to the circus.

We workers made few decisions of our own. We lived in a kind of cocoon, where all our needs were met. We got three meals a day, a bunk to sleep in, plenty of hard physical work, and a tour of the country.

Every morning we woke to the trumpeting of elephants and the roar of lions, sounds that could be heard up to five miles away. The employees and the animals were always hungry, and always being fed with good healthy food.

The band music lifted my spirits and gave me strength. The sound of the calliope brought tears to my eyes. The clowns made me laugh and helped me forget my loneliness, poverty, and discomfort of many kinds.

I loved the smell of a new lot where grass had just been

mowed. Most intoxicating of all, the smell of fresh, clean sawdust transported me. Once you get the sawdust of the circus in your blood, you never forget it. It just keeps calling you back.

The circus has a magnetic attraction and washes away the dust of everyday living. It's a magical work of beauty, adventure, and rugged stability. The circus carries people out of reality into illusion. The lure is so powerful that I joined twice, and began to see America. I fell in love with it, and sawdust got into my blood at an early age. I have never recovered. Jack London is one of my favorite writers. He said it best when he wrote:

I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet. The proper function of man is to live, not exist. I shall not waste my days in trying to prolong them. I shall use my time.

Don't you sometimes feel like you'd die if you didn't know what's beyond them hills?

There's the Pacific Ocean beyond, an' China, an' India... I've lived in Oakland all my life, but I'm not going to live here the rest of my life, not by a long shot. I'm going to get away.

The Seed is Sown

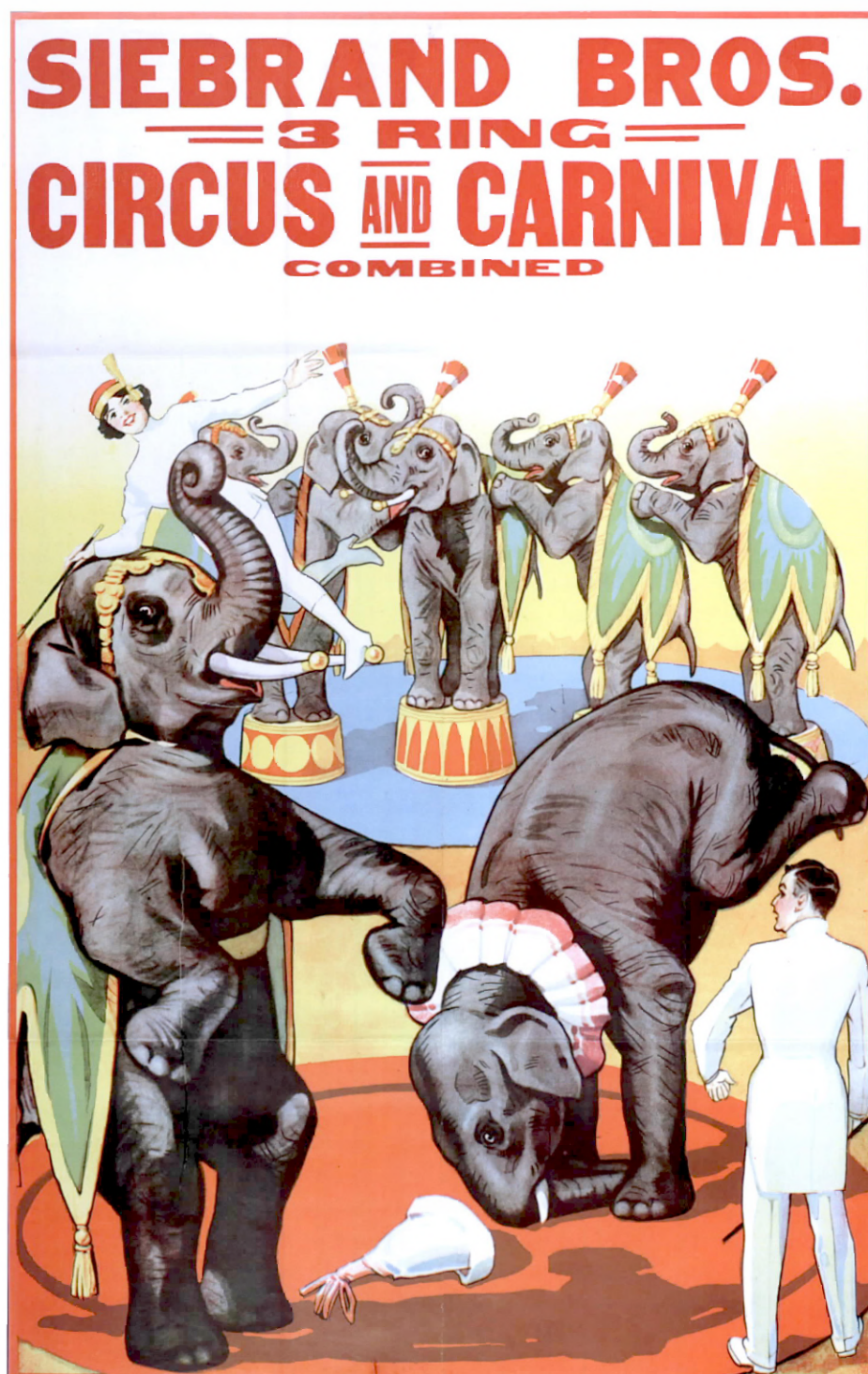
When I was in grade school in the 1940s, the New Mexico State Fair attracted people from all over the state. I looked forward to going out to the fairgrounds and watching the construction of Folks Greater Shows which furnished the carnival midway each year. In the 50s the Siebrand Bros. Circus and Carnival replaced it. It was a magical world of rides, games, cotton candy, candy apples, and gypsies.

The midway was loaded with

games of chance, big rides, kiddy rides, and a sideshow with live freaks, and concession stands selling delicious things to eat. They also had several grind shows, a haunted house, a hall of mirrors, and a fun house. I liked to watch the workmen construct the Roll-O-Plane, the Tilt-A-Whirl, and

the Ferris wheel. The beautiful and noisy Merry-Go-Round was always in the center of the midway.

At night the diesel generators ran full blast feeding electricity to thousands of colorful lights blazing over the midway. It was a dreamy land with the constant dirt and dust making a



Siebrand Bros. Circus and Carnival was among the shows that inspired the author's early love of the circus.
Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



Diano #33 air calliope-ticket wagon, 1953.

The Pfening Archives

mask of fantasy over everything. I was hypnotized as if I were in another world.

Some of the people in the show seemed to live a hand-to-mouth existence. The men who set up the rides were rough and rugged. A gypsy family lived in an old automobile parked in back of the midway with a canvas lean-to attached to the roof. They kept to themselves and spoke a different (and to me, strange) language. They fascinated me with their dark skin and Caucasian features. The fortune-teller had long black hair and dark piercing eyes. From her earlobes large gold earrings dangled and flashed. At night she looked glamorous and mysterious in front of her tent. But in the daylight it was obvious that she wore several layers of black dresses with holes in different places so that she was adequately covered. Her skinny children ran free in ragged clothes. I wondered if they went to school or ever received discipline from their parents.

The fortune-teller's husband was tall and thin with long, shiny-black hair combed straight back. His face was handsome but rugged from living out-of-doors. He never smiled or showed any emotion. He wore a brightly colored, long-sleeved silk shirt open to show his hairy chest and gold chain around his neck. He wore an earring. I had never seen a man wearing an earring before. I kept my distance because he was scary.

The fortune-teller sat in front of her little tent. A large painted plywood board in the shape of a palmistry hand showing palm mounts, the Ring of Venus, head lines, life lines, and fate lines. Other signs displayed astrological signs and symbols. The gypsy advertised that she could give information and advice about love and marriage. She could predict future events based on the position of the planets and the sun. It was all very serious and mysterious. I wondered what it would feel like to have my palm read, but I never had enough money. Later I learned that gypsies, who originated in India, have roamed all over the world for thousands of



Diano steam calliope, June 1953, old Stevens Bros. trailer.

The Pfening Archives

years. Too soon the fair came to an end and the carnies and gypsies vanished into the night. It was time to go back to school. But weeks later, when I passed the empty fairground, I wondered where the carnival had come from and where it had gone. My dream of traveling to far-away places and seeing things I would never see or experience in Albuquerque began right there.

The Call of the Calliope

Albuquerque grew quickly. During those early years my dad taught me some important values that have helped me throughout my life. He taught me to always have a job, never to steal or gamble and to pay cash when I bought things. He also cautioned me about credit cards.

In 1951 I got a job at the new Tingley Coliseum at the Fairgrounds. I was excited to be working in the concession department as a seat-butcher selling programs, popcorn, and peanuts.

When the new Ice Arena opened I worked as a seat-butcher there, selling cokes and hot dogs. It was wonderful to see big name shows come through town. We had the Jack Carson Show, The Ice Capades, Holiday on Ice, and the Horace Heidt Show. I made a little money and my dad seemed to be happy with me, but my grades in school suffered when I fell asleep in class from being at the arena late at night.

An important thing happened to me there in 1952. One afternoon I was sweeping the floor and I saw what looked like a quarter. I picked it up, looked it over, and discovered it was a St. Christopher medal. Someone told me that show people carry the medal for protection against personal injury and for good luck. I put it in my billfold and it has been with me ever since. I believe in this medal.

When I saved enough money, I bought a new motorcycle. That gave me freedom to travel around town. It was then that I became interested in small amusement parks. I made friends with some of the workmen and occasionally

helped set up and tear down kiddie-rides. The men I worked with were all former carnies and they taught me some of the basics of operating rides. I learned how to operate a Ferris wheel and a Merry-Go-Round and loved it.

Every year The Gil Gray Circus, sponsored by the Shrine Temple, came to the baseball park in town. It presented a two-hour performance of good clean entertainment for a dollar fifty. Large crowds attended every show, probably because people didn't have television and were looking for something fun to do. Gil Gray's Circus featured Dolly Jacob's Liberty Horses, The Don DeWayne Troupe, and the Portis Simms Jockey Dogs. He had elephants, camels, dogs, monkeys, ponies, and lots of pretty girls.

Before the show started, the clowns went to work warming up the audience. They knew how to get a normally serious audience into a relaxed and light-hearted mood. Nothing brings more joy to children than the zany antics of the clown. I'd heard the saying, "Old soldiers never die—they just fade away." Now I was hearing, "Clowns never die—they don't even fade away." The production numbers were hilarious and absurd. They had beautiful and ridiculous costumes that always looked clean. I loved the happy, light-hearted

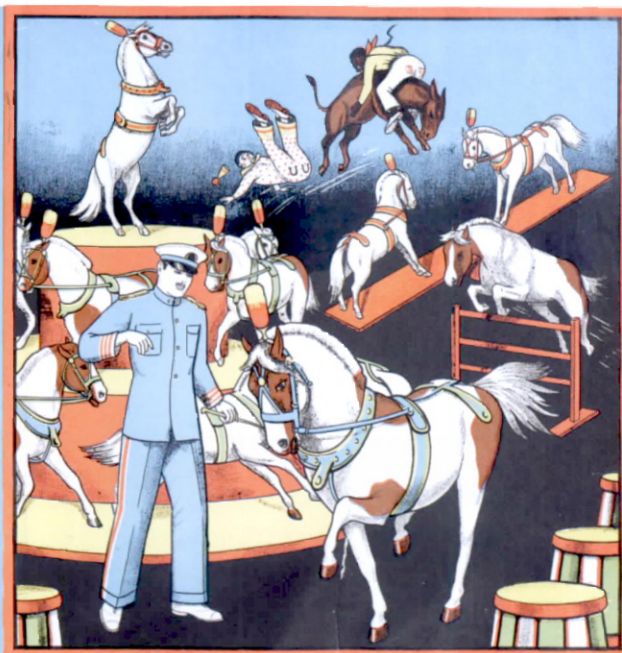
songs played on the organ: *I'm Looking Over A Four Leaf Clover* and *Happy Days Are Here Again*.

Professional musicians kept the show moving fast with marches, waltzes, tangos, foxtrots, and rumbas. They changed the tempo for high wire acrobats, a juggler, and animal acts. Organ music increased the suspense and drum rolls foreshadowed extremely dangerous acts in the center ring. I always had a warm feeling inside when I left the show and went home.

For most folks the circus means conviviality and entertainment. It reminds them that life can be good. Gil Gray Circus kindled my love affair with outdoor show business and the Ben Davenport and Clyde Beatty shows fanned the flame. All three brought shows to Albuquerque in the early '50s. The three owners were highly professional and knew how to produce a tremendous show.

The first time I ever saw a big top (main tent) was at the Wallace Bros. Circus. Before Ben Davenport brought Wallace Bros. Circus to town his advance men displayed posters and lithographs in store windows. The show was advertised in the newspaper and on the radio. When the time came, schools were let out so kids could attend. Theirs was the

WALLACE BROS. CIRCUS



Wallace Bros. and other shows run by Ben Davenport visited Albuquerque in the 40s and 50s.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

first circus parade I ever saw. Doc Phillips, an employee of the show, hired me and several other boys to unload trucks, set up bleachers, and water the elephants. It was hard, dirty work but we were thrilled when we received free passes.

When Clyde Beatty came to town a year later, I saw my first railroad circus.¹ The train was amazingly long. It included coaches, flat cars, and stock cars. Clyde Beatty was, not only the owner, but also the star of the show. When he went into the steel lion cage, pandemonium broke loose. He held a wooden chair in one hand and a whip in the other, and he had a holster with a large pistol strapped to his waist. The roaring lions were large and noisy, but they were gorgeous to look at. They did rollovers and sit-ups and one even jumped through a ring of fire. Sometimes a fight broke out among the lions and they made a tremendous racket with their roaring and snarling. When Clyde Beatty shot his gun into the air the loud bang caused the people to jump out of their skins, but the animals quieted down. The gun, of course, was loaded with blanks. Sparks and smoke came from the barrel. As Mr. Beatty reached the end of his show, the big top was filled with smoke. Stunned onlookers sat spellbound until they broke into enthusiastic applause. Elephants, clowns, and pretty girls paraded while the music soared, taking the pitch to sensational heights—an all-around first class show.

When it was time for them to leave town, I went to the railroad tracks to see them load the circus. It was a beautiful sight lit by a floodlight supplied with electricity from a small generator wagon. Dozens of trucks and tractors pulled two and three wagons each. The men who did this heavy work were called the train crew or razorbacks. The flat cars didn't have much room on them but every inch of space was utilized. The small-animal cages were called cross-cages because they could be lifted and turned crossways on the flat car.

A few days later as I made my way over the tracks, I asked myself who are these people, where do they come from, and where are they going? It seemed a wonderful mystery. The circus reminded me of the carnival at the State Fair that I had fallen in love with years ago—here today, gone tomorrow. It represented a carefree way of life—rootless gypsies always on the move and I wanted to go, too.

One day I met Mr. Wyley D. Skinner, a local businessman and avid circus fan. I asked him many questions about the circus. He told me the best way to study it was to buy a newspaper called *The Billboard* where circuses, carnivals, and other forms of outdoor show business placed help wanted ads. *The Billboard* was often referred to as the showman's

bible. Many people who were employed in show business had no permanent address, so mail was sent to "The Billboard," to be forwarded. Most of the circuses and carnivals listed their routes and advertised new and used show equipment. There were interesting stories about show people and places they appeared. It was fascinating reading for only thirty-five cents.

Albuquerque Journal
February 9, 1953 (Tuesday) Page 18

LIONS, ELEPHANTS ARRIVE FOR CIRCUS

Unloading of circus animals always draws a good crowd. And this proved true here Sunday. About 600 persons – the kids, the curious, and just plain circus lovers watched at the City Zoo Sunday afternoon as the three elephants and seven lions were unloaded after a 500 mile trip by truck from Abilene, Texas, to stretch.

The animals were exercised for an hour at the zoo-then re-loaded and carried to their quarters near the Ice Arena for the night where they will be on display all day today. The animals left Abilene early Saturday.

The lions belong to Arumi Singh, turbaned Hindu animal trainer who will put them through their paces during the six performances of the circus beginning Tuesday.

Performances are slated at 3 and 8:30 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday at the Ice Arena.

The show is being assembled in Albuquerque by Tom Buchanan, and upon leaving here will go on the road for seven months. Showings after Albuquerque will include Santa Fe and other New Mexico cities, and then the circus will swing into Texas.

The circus is being sponsored here by Hugh A. Carlisle Post of the American Legion. Reserved tickets for the circus are on sale at Cook's, Ruppe Drug, Hugh A. Carlisle Legion Post headquarters, Stormsburg's Heights Store, Joe Belli's Sporting Goods, and the Special Service offices at Sandia and Kirtland Bases.

When I read this newspaper article I went downtown to the zoo to see the elephants and lions. A crowd gathered as the cages were opened for viewing. The elephants stretched their legs and drank water. In about an hour they were loaded and I followed the truck to the Ice Arena. Because it was so cold at night the animals were housed inside the Ice Arena storage room. The cages had big "DANGER" signs painted on them. I watched Arumi Singh² cut up large pieces of raw meat for the lions. The females were big and noisy. I could smell the ammonia in their urine—absolutely repulsive. They paced inside their cages, roaring at the top of their lungs. With a long-handled pitchfork Singh stabbed the meat and shoved it into the opening at the base of the cage. Large paws with razor sharp claws snaked out and snagged the meat into the cage. The lions fought viciously among themselves. Each cat got a chunk, which she held between her paws while she continued to snarl and growl at

1. Wallace Bros., which played Albuquerque on May 27/28, 1952. The Beatty show played the city July 7, 1947; October 12-13, 1948; July 25-26, 1949; and October 13, 1951. It did not play there in 1950 or from 1952 to 1955. Mr. Holecheck would have seen the Beatty railer first, then the Wallace big top.

2. The performer's name is often spelled Arumai Singh, but advertising for the Diano show used "Arumi."

the others. More fights broke out but they didn't hurt each other because they had so much fur. They wolfed it down without chewing. When they finished eating they drank water and settled down for a nap. They reminded me of house cats contentedly licking and grooming their fur.

Large bales of hay were brought in for the elephants. Unlike the lions, they ate at a leisurely pace shoving hay into their mouths with their trunks. They were females, too, and obviously healthy. They also had an odor all their own. It was repugnant, but a fascinating phenomena.

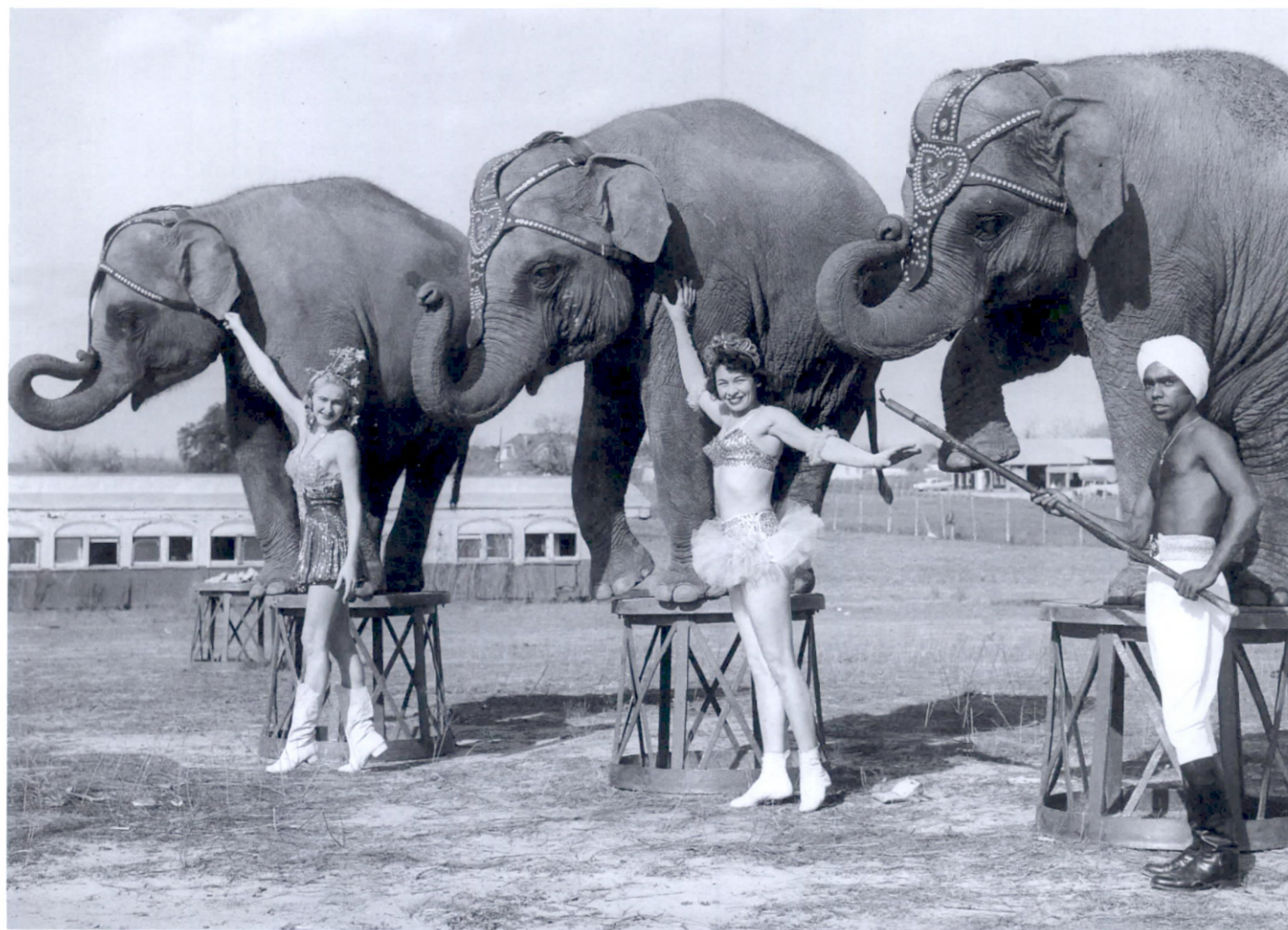
I hung around watching everything and getting acquainted with Hungry, Pee Wee, and Bill who were in charge of taking care of the animals, other than the lions. I listened intently as they told me about circus life. As I watched them unload equipment and construct the steel arena for the lion act, I wanted to be working with them. After attending every show, I made my decision to join the circus. When I told them about it, they said they could use me, but I'd have to be hired first. The manager, Mr. Buchanan, was reluctant to hire me because I was only fifteen years old. He said, "Bring your mother and dad in and I'll talk to them."

Even though there had been times of strain, I had never

seen my parents as upset as when I told them I was joining the circus. They loved me and wanted me to be happy, but they were concerned about school and my safety. I was leaving a good home, quitting school, and going into the unknown for an undetermined amount of time. Dad reluctantly went with me to the Ice Arena to talk to Mr. Buchanan, but they made me wait outside. I don't know what they discussed. They may have talked about health insurance, liability, and employee benefits. Afterwards my father seemed sad as he told me to get in the car. He explained the hardships that lay ahead. He tried hard to persuade me to finish school. Back at home my mother first cried then yelled at me. We went to see the principal of the high school and he emphasized the importance of a home, of living with a mother and father, and of finishing school.

"When you return from the circus, you will have to go to summer school in order to graduate with your class, he said as we left his office. Mother cried all the way home. I felt so bad that I had broken her heart. I loved my parents but I had made up my mind. Joining the circus was what I wanted to do.

I reported to the manager who seemed satisfied that



Singh on Dailey Bros. at winter quarters in Gonzales, Texas.

The Pfening Archives

everything was taken care of. I checked in with Hungry and Pee Wee. After the last show that evening I helped tear down Arumi Singh's steel cage and loaded the trucks.

I went home to sleep. Early the next morning I packed my suitcase and said goodbye to mother, dad, and my sister. On the one hand I was terrified, but on the other I was full of anticipation. As I walked out the door, dad handed me a five-dollar bill and said, "You'll need this to buy a bus ticket home from Santa Fe." He was certain that I wouldn't like the long hours, hard work, hand-to-mouth existence, and that I wouldn't make it any farther than forty miles away. I took a small suitcase with a couple of changes of underwear, some pants, and a couple of shirts. I had my harmonica and a bedroll left over from Boy Scouts. My mistake was taking only one pair of shoes, which later turned out to be a disaster. My brain held the odds and ends of a 10th grade education but I lacked anchorage to any permanent values. I was restless and energetic, and I thought I was supposed to live by my own strength and intelligence. Joining the circus was a major turning point in my life because it was the first time I ever tried to stand on my own.

My heart pounded with excitement as I put my suitcase

and bedroll in the cab of the elephant truck. Pee Wee and I were passengers while Hungry drove. Bill and Arumi Singh went ahead in the lion truck. Along with the automobiles and the performers' trailers we formed a caravan. As we left the city limits of Albuquerque, all the vehicles pulled to the side of the road. My first thought when the manager walked back to our truck was that he was going to fire me. My heart jumped into my throat. But instead he paid Hungry and Pee Wee their wages and handed me three dollars. I took a deep breath and relaxed. I was in!

In Santa Fe we unloaded the elephants and set up camp in a freezing-cold empty warehouse. We found a big potbellied stove and immediately built a fire in it. It warmed us a bit. Our show had three female Asian elephants. All elephants are called bulls whether they are male or female. Jenny, Virginia, and Ruth were chained to the steel columns. We spread bales of hay on the floor in an attempt to keep their feet from getting too cold.

Pee Wee dropped a bale of hay in front of Ruth, and her big foot came crashing down to break the wire so she could begin to eat. Each elephant had a unique personality and was a seasoned trooper. Ruth and Virginia took orders from



Singh on Dailey Bros.

The Pfening Archives



Singh & baby elephant on Dailey Bros. Circus.

The Pfening Archives

Jenny, who was the largest and oldest—a mother figure who commanded respect. Whenever a member of the troupe needed discipline Jenny's trunk whacked her.

They were obviously unhappy standing on the cold concrete floor all night. They swayed back and forth. They slammed their trunks against the concrete, which made a loud popping noise like a firecracker. They rattled their chains and wanted warmth and attention. They made all kinds of whining, snorting, crying, and roaring sounds. I felt sorry for them and we never left them alone, but I knew enough to keep a safe distance from them.

That night I rolled out my bedroll on a couple of bales of hay and started to play my harmonica. All of a sudden Bill yelled at me to throw that damn harmonica in the trash. Harmonicas bring bad luck in the circus so I threw it away.

During the night I was startled by the sensation of warm air blowing in my face. It was Jenny straining at her heel chain and looming over my bedroll. I was terrified having a huge elephant breathing warm air into my face. I jumped up, frightening her, and she pulled back to her place between the other two bulls. Everyone else was asleep so no one saw or commented.

I noticed the stove needed more wood so I started the

fire again, moved my bedroll, and eventually went back to sleep. Elephants can do unexpected things, and I wondered what she was thinking. Could she have been considering grabbing and killing me? Maybe she realized I was the new kid in the circus and was being protective. I wondered if she was trying to warm me with her breath. Or was she waking me so I would re-fuel the stove and provide heat for us all? From that night on, I thought about elephants and have concluded that inside their huge bodies and brains they know things that human beings do not.

Occasionally one of the men gave the elephants a treat like carrots or Coke, or a head of lettuce or cabbage. I saw Virginia pick up a cabbage with her trunk, tilt her head back and throw the entire thing into her mouth. She swallowed without chewing—probably so she could get it down before the other elephants stole it from her. All of them liked beer. I got a kick out of seeing Ruth pick up a can someone opened for her, pour the contents down her throat, and throw the empty can across the room.

My first morning, we set up inside St. Michael's Gymnasium. I was given my first job as a seat butcher. I sold popcorn, peanuts, and soda pop in the bleachers. In spite of the cold weather we drew a half-house and I made a little money. That night I was dead tired and laid my bedroll on a bleacher. I crawled in fully clothed. It was scary sleeping in an empty building alone, but it was warmer than the warehouse, and quieter, too.

We loaded the trucks and left the next morning after the show ended. The trucks were old and worn out. They had always pulled a lot of weight. But Hungry was a careful driver. As we approached Tucumcari the lion truck pulled off the highway, and we stopped to see what the problem was. The rear axle was broken. After a close inspection the manager decided to call a welder. It was freezing cold, the wind never stopped blowing, and we had icicles hanging from our bumper. Late that night a welder came out and welded the axle back together. It was too late to drive all the way to Amarillo, Texas, so we slept right there on Highway 66.

Without knowing any better, I laid my bedroll on the ground under the elephant truck. I wore every piece of clothing I owned. As I lay on the ground I felt warm water pouring on top of me. The elephants had urinated and it was pouring out through a hole in the floor. I jumped out from under the trailer and tried to wipe it off, but of course that was impossible. I didn't have any dry clothes so I had to keep walking around the trucks the rest of the night to keep from freezing. I hung my bedroll on the side of the truck hoping it would dry out. There was no place to go inside and get warm. At first light we headed for Amarillo. The warmth in the cab made me smell so bad we had to ride with the windows open to let in fresh air, and then we weren't warm any more. Fortunately, everyone took it as a big joke.

"Whitey, you have just been initiated into the circus,"

Hungry said driving along. They called me Whitey because my hair was blond. We all laughed and went on—what else could we do?

Things temporarily got better in Amarillo. The All Star Circus was booked into the Tri-State Fairgrounds and we set up camp inside a warm, cozy barn. There was plenty of fresh hay and fodder. The elephants and lions were fed and watered and they seemed to be warm and relaxed. We had a large potbellied stove, and I had time to heat some hot water and wash the bedroll and my clothes. While the clothes dried near the stove, I heated more water and had the luxury of a bucket bath. I appreciated feeling and smelling clean again. We stayed in the barn drinking coffee and talking until bedtime.

The day we arrived in Levelland, Texas, we set up inside an abandoned theatre on Main Street. The tired old hall had probably been used for vaudeville shows and then as a movie theater. It was unusual to present the circus performance on a wooden stage. We were concerned that the floor was too brittle to support the heavy weight of the performing elephants, but it did all right. A small crowd came but I didn't sell much popcorn. A lot of times I didn't make enough money to feed myself. Sleeping in the cab of a truck was getting tiresome. I wished I could at least afford a cheap hotel



Diano elephants, 1953.

Piercy-Tibbals photo in the Pfening Archives

room and a few hamburgers, but it was out of the question.

All the performers were highly disciplined and skilled old-timers who had been in show business for many years. The performances were always excellent. I watched carefully whenever I had time. Even though I was fifteen and new in show business, I was proud to be part of the troupe.

Arumi Singh's lion act was the feature of the show. Singh, originally from India, spoke English with a slight accent. He was a handsome young man and a dedicated performer. His style was similar to Clyde Beatty but on a smaller scale. Hungry, Pee Wee, Bill, and I set up the steel arena and when it came time for the show the lions sat on their pedestals. They could balance on their back legs, form a pyramid together, and one of them could jump through a flaming hoop. The cats lay down in the center of the arena. When Singh gave the command they all rolled over together in a synchronization of rippling muscles. The audience loved it because it was fast and sensational. We held our breath when fights broke out among the cats, but Singh always managed to get things back under control. While we tore down the cage the clowns came in and delighted the audience with their antics.

The All Star Circus was a generic name for indoor winter-date circuses. Many performers could not find employment during the winter months so they banded together to form a show that played indoor theaters and gymnasiums. The slim-pickings during the wintertime were better than sitting in a trailer park and not working. I learned that most of the performers had agents who booked them into circuses that opened in April. They read *The Billboard* regularly and waited for spring. Our All Star Circus had an advance man, a show manager, a ringmaster, a three-piece band, three downs, a trampoline act, slack wire, dogs and ponies, a juggler, and several other excellent numbers besides the elephants and lions. Gerry Philippus, a beautiful young



Singh, Campa Bros., 1951.

The Pfening Archives

showgirl, did webs and trained elephants. I admired her and watched every act she was in. She had a bubbly personality and enjoyed her work thoroughly. She was an inspiration to me. The performers traveled in their own automobiles and house trailers.

One day a rumor started that our show was running out of bookings. The grapevine had it that we were broke. Some acts weren't being paid. The circus people worried that we would not get through the winter. As we drove our truck into Andrews, Texas, we saw the manager standing on the school grounds at the high school talking to a lady dressed like a P. E. teacher. We'd been hoping we could set up in the gym and give a performance, but the powers-that-be said no, so we drove on to Big Springs. Hungry voiced concern about the manager being able to buy gasoline for the two trucks, so whenever we stopped he turned the engine off to conserve fuel.

Spirits and morale rose at Big Springs Air Force Base. An MP at the gate escorted us to an empty airplane hanger where bleachers were already set up. We were excited and eager. The weather was perfect and everything was fine until we started unloading the elephants and the steel cage. Pee Wee discovered that the elephants had chewed up the leather straps used to hold the cage together. They had been cooped up for 175 miles without being let out for water or to stretch their legs. They were hungry and bored and like unattended children were always getting into mischief. They found the straps tasty and amusing. My three buddies were so furious they used language the likes of which I'd never heard before.

It was only a short time until the first show and we had nothing to hold the steel cage together. All the workers and performers came to see what kind of trouble we were in. It seemed as if there was no solution. We'd have to eliminate the cat act. What a terrible blow to Arumi Singh. But circus people are ingenious at meeting emergency situations and in a few minutes someone came up with an idea. A man went into town to purchase a roll of baling wire and iron-worker's pliers and Pee Wee cut the wire into eighteen-inch pieces and wired the cage together. Neither the lions nor the audience ever knew the difference. After the act each section was cut loose, removed, and stacked and the show went on. There was no time or money to buy new leather straps so we repeated the process twice a day until the tour was over. The wire was cheaper than leather straps, but it required more labor. The mischievous act done by our elephants added work to our normal routine and slowed down the fast-paced show, as well. But the clowns were a special lubricant that kept it moving smoothly. We'd have been dull without them.

The three clowns, Jack and Ruby Landrus and Lew Kish entertained throughout the show. Jack and Ruby were white-faced clowns. They were old-timers and the funniest

and most professional clowns I had ever seen. Jack always got laughs with his corny jokes, and with his conversations with the ringmaster who was the straight-man. Lew's tramp character wore beat-up clothes and oversized shoes. Each was a one-person show but the three characters worked well together. Ruby was a wonderful cook and one time she gave Pee Wee and me each a piece of apple pie for moving some heavy trunks for her. I was thrilled to talk to a real clown. I was also very hungry.

We planned to stay on the road for several more weeks but the advance man had problems booking us in Texas and got discouraged. More rumors circulated but Hungry and Pee Wee kept assuring me we had winter quarters to go to. I didn't know what a winter quarters was. They kept talking about a place called Gonzales, and it would be our new home.

We moved the show to Odessa after a day's layover in Midland. Although it was cold at night, Texas was a little warmer than New Mexico. One day, when business was slow, I watched most of the performances and enjoyed them immensely. That was when I got the bug to be a performer.

I'd been watching the trampoline act with riveted attention. It looked so easy. I wanted to jump high into the air and do somersaults like the performers. I could become a professional in a week or two and then I'd make more money. I had no idea how dangerous it really was. One morning I noticed the trampoline in the aisle. It was beautiful. I looked around—no one there. I took my shoes off and got up on it. When I started jumping I went much higher than I intended. That canvas was stretched tight! I didn't have the slightest idea what I was doing, and at first it felt good. As I bounced up, I decided to try a flip. I flipped over all right, but when I got upside down, I blacked out for an instant. My head hit the trampoline instead of my feet and I thought I had landed on concrete.

I lay there unable to move and in excruciating pain. I was going to die. When I opened my eyes the ceiling spun. My neck hurt so badly I started to cry. An angry performer came over and helped me off the trampoline. I was so glad I wasn't paralyzed or dead that I had to agree with everything he said when he gave me an enraged tongue-lashing. I was lucky to be alive.

"Get out of here and never go near the props again!" he shouted. As I hobbled through the exit I realized I could have done permanent damage to my back or worse, broken my neck. I could have died or been paralyzed for the rest of my life. As it was I had a sore neck and aching back for weeks. That taught me to respect other people's property. I never again had a desire to perform, but I still wanted to be part of the circus.

After the last performance at the Odessa High School gym we received the bad news that we had no more bookings. We were out of business. Some of the performers were

Tēxans Flock to See New Diano Outfit

HENDERSON, Tex., April 18. —Texans have apparently put their stamp of approval on the new Diano Bros.' Circus. Show is doing big business in the State and in most cases is playing to full or near-full stands.

Business here Wednesday (15) was typical. Despite cool weather the show's big top was almost full for both matinee and evening performances. The stand was further helped by a street parade and show received good notices from the local press. Henderson was played under auspices of the American Legion.

Palestine, Tex., gave overflow business at the night show on Monday (13) and in the afternoon the seats were almost all taken. Crockett was a big day Saturday (11), when every seat was taken for both performances. Show came into Crockett well fortified with good advance and much publicity created by the Junior Chamber of Commerce.

Only weak recent crowd was the afternoon turnout at Lufkin on Friday (10). Only about 25 per cent of the seats were filled but the evening performance jumped to almost a full house. Show came into Lufkin after pulling full houses at Bryan and Huntsville the two previous days.

going to Hugo, Oklahoma and others were heading for Florida. We packed up our equipment, loaded the trucks, and the following morning we said goodbye. We were exhausted and desperate for food and rest.

Few words were spoken as we drove towards Gonzales, Texas. Pee Wee and I slept as we drove through San Antonio, Texas that night. Hungry woke me and told me to look out the window. Down the street I saw the Alamo lit up with giant floodlights. That was a moment I will never forget. It was a historical building and I had a good feeling about being in Texas.

Winter Quarters, Gonzales, Texas

Circus winter quarters was located at the edge of Gonzales, Texas, 60 miles east of San Antonio with a population

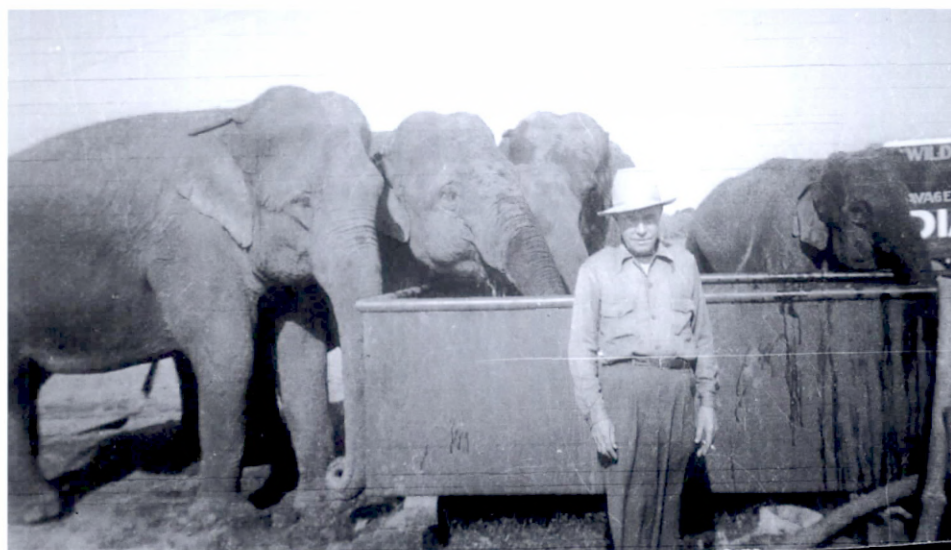
This newspaper clipping was attached to the photo below.

clipping from the Pfening Archives



Stamped Herzik Studio, Schulenburg, Tex. on the back of the picture.

The Pfening Archives



Diano elephants (man unknown)

The Pfening Archives

of about six thousand people. Originally the land was used as the Gonzales County Fairgrounds, but Mr. Davenport purchased it in the '40s and operated Dailey Bros. Circus, from there. An abandoned railroad track ran up to the entrance. The show traveled all over the United States and parts of Canada. Many circuses prospered during World War II because they had little competition from television.

When we drove through the entrance and I saw how impressive it was, I was afraid I wouldn't be allowed to stay. I hadn't been with the circus very long. But the show manager and Hungry had a quick conference with Ben Davenport and they decided to put me to work. Mr. Davenport was a tough looking man and wore a slouched hat. He sent me to the cookhouse to tell Irene to feed me. Gratitude flooded my being.

When I told the cook Mr. Davenport had sent me she sat me down and served sausage, eggs, milk, coffee, and delicious pancakes. But instead of good old Log Cabin syrup like we had at home, she gave me molasses. I nearly gagged on the strong taste. I was still hungry enough to eat all the pancakes with it anyhow. She served grits—another southern specialty I'd never heard of. I was impressed with the quantity and quality of the food and decided southern food was going to be a real pleasure.

I was escorted to a wooden bunkhouse with a dirt floor and told to leave my suitcase and bedroll on a top bunk. Ten men or so lived there and the minute I walked in I knew it was a hostile environment for a kid like me.

Pee Wee gave me a tour of the winter quarters. A two-story house

sat near the entrance. The boss lived there with his wife and their boarder, Singh. It was off-limits to all other personnel.

The elephant barn reminded me of Noah's Ark. It sheltered about fifteen elephants, Singh's six lions, a chimpanzee, and some smaller animals. Even though they were well cared for, the barn was poorly ventilated and smelled terrible. I was told to respect the animals and to never enter the barn unless one of the caretakers invited me. A five-legged pig lived in a pen in back of the barn. The barn was mucked out every day and the manure loaded onto a horse-drawn wagon. They dumped it in the field that once

had grown crops. Having their own farm must have saved them a lot of money on food for the animals, but now they got it from other places.

Another barn contained dozens of horse stalls—home to liberty horses, ponies, and a few other animals. A practice ring in the middle was covered with sawdust. The big garage barn held trucks painted, lettered, and gaily decorated for the coming season. A warehouse was full of old tents and other paraphernalia. A smaller building contained concession supplies. Two old, wooden railroad coaches on blocks stood in the middle of the grounds. At the edge of the property a small stream emptied into the Guadalupe River. Every afternoon, unless it rained, the elephants were tethered in the field. If it rained they had to stay in the barn, which was too bad. They loved being out-of-doors.

When I got back to the bunkhouse, I found my suitcase open with my clothes tossed all over the bunk. I looked around and there were the men sitting around a small

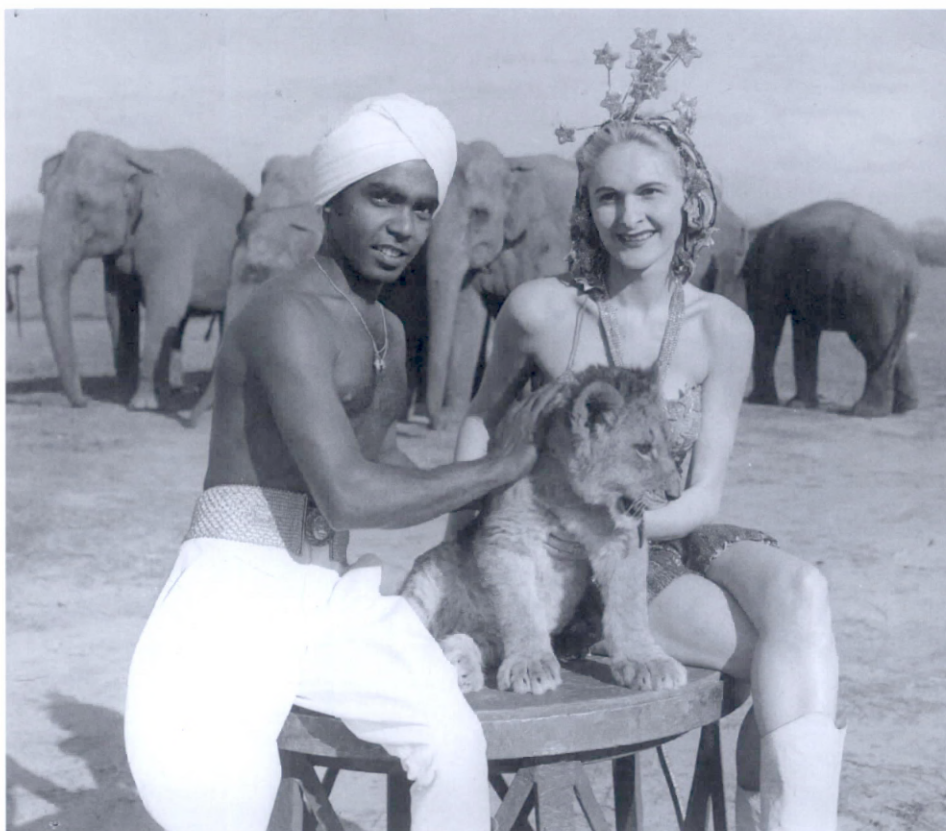


Diano truck #46, wardrobe.

The Pfening Archives

wooden table playing poker. One small electric light bulb hung over the table. Nobody looked at me or said a word. I felt the hatred and tension. They didn't like newcomers. I don't think they even liked each other much. I was scared, but there was no place to hide. I gathered my clothes and put them back in the suitcase. I rolled out my bedroll and climbed up onto the bunk and lay awake most of the night. A few days later I moved my bedroll into the hay in the horse barn. I felt much safer among the horses.

Several old men lived off to themselves sleeping in ancient circus wagons. The wagons reminded me of gypsy caravans in a graveyard. Most of the wooden wheels were missing, so they sat up on blocks. You could barely make out Dailey Bros. Circus in faded paint on their sides. It was sad to see the elderly men living in dilapidated circus wagons, but that was all they had. I assumed some of them were Second World War veterans receiving small pensions from the government. Some were crippled and others walked with crutches. Some had missing arms or legs. Their grammar was atrocious, but they seemed to have good common sense. They lived a simple life existing the best they could. They accepted their hardships and some of them even showed a sense of humor. When I overheard them talking about the good old days I understood that in the '40s the Dailey Circus was a grand and glorious show. I assumed that Mr. Davenport was giving the veterans a place to sleep, three meals a day, and light

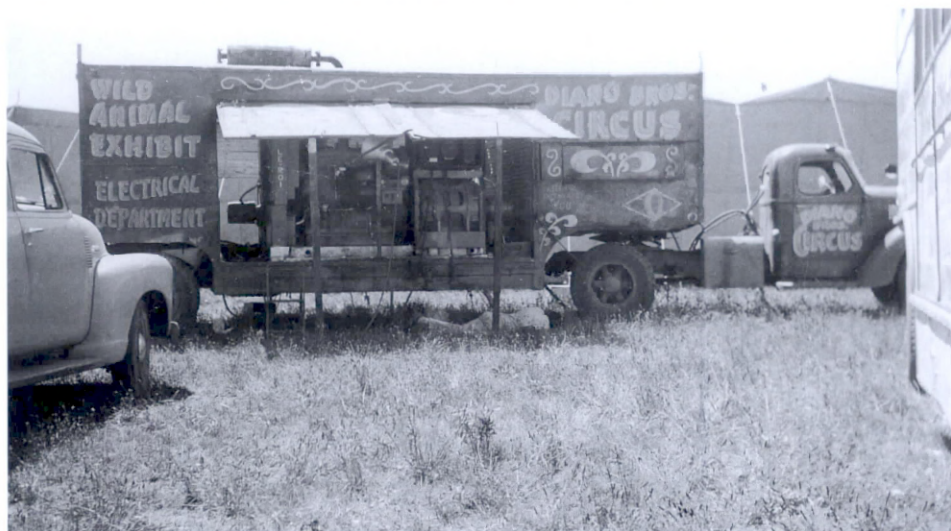


Singh and lion cub (performer unknown) at Dailey Bros. winter quarters, Gonzales Texas.
The Pfening Archives

duties because they had been loyal and worked his shows for many years.

Near an open field huge piles of wooden stakes, stringers (planks used for seating), broken props and old concession stands lay exposed to the elements. Rain and humidity had done considerable damage, but one man spent every day repairing, sanding, and painting the best stringers for re-use.

Winter quarters was used by Dailey Bros. Circus from 1944 to 1949, Campas Bros. from 1950, and Wallace Bros. 1951-1952, and now Diano Bros. Circus, 1953. There were about 87 acres. On the surface, the men worked at a relaxed pace, but underneath they were organized. It was a time and place for preparation and we followed a routine every day. At five a.m. we washed and shaved, ate a big breakfast, and went to work. We were busy until four p.m., which was dinnertime. After dinner we had the rest of the day off. Some men took a walk while others played cards and dominoes. The early evenings were beautiful and I loved to walk into town and look at houses and



Diano generator truck

The Pfening Archives

other buildings.

There was a small barbecue stand on the street near the winter quarter's entrance. Even though I couldn't afford to buy any, the aroma of mesquite flavored barbecue sauce rising in a column of smoke was so powerful it made me salivate. I walked past an old brick high school and thought about my life and what I was doing in the circus. Downtown consisted of a two-storied hotel, a grocery store, and an old movie theater. I liked the beautiful monument to the heroes of the Texas revolution.

As the weeks went by I began to feel accepted by the some of the men. Heavy had an important position as manager of the big top department. He lived in a small house on the grounds with his wife and a son named Jimmy. They had a small black and white television set and invited four young men to come and watch *Lassie*. We enjoyed sitting on the floor of their comfortable living room and laughing at the show. I felt safe there.

Playing with a lion cub was a treat, too. Chatah weighed about 25 pounds, and her paws were bigger than my hands. Pee Wee got her out of her cage to play with us. Fortunately she was too young to be dangerous. She didn't know how to use her claws. She craved attention. I hugged her, scratched behind her ears and rubbed her tummy. She loved to chew on my hands and arms and even though she didn't mean to hurt me, her teeth felt like needles.

The only bad thing about Chatah was that she smelled terrible and I always had to wash up after playing with her or I smelled so bad I couldn't stand myself. She was well cared for and got the attention she wanted, but Pee Wee said she would soon get big, fast, and dangerous and then would have to stay in a cage for the rest of her life, except when she was in the ring.

Two ancient railroad coaches with the roof and sides slowly rotting away sat up on blocks in another part of the compound. The insides were still dry, though, so that's where the circus kept the harnesses, trappings, tack, and blankets.

For a couple of weeks I worked under Walter "Annabelle" Schuyler in this department. I washed and cleaned harnesses and folded horse blankets. Mr. Davenport had invested a lot of money in trappings. They were heavy and well crafted so they could be used on elephants, zebras, and horses in parades season after season.

I was determined to stay in winter quarters and work so I could leave with the new circus in April. Time seemed to pass slowly. I was getting anxious to get on the road and under canvas. One day I had to learn a valuable lesson.

A group of men from the bunkhouse were standing in front of the cookhouse talking and waiting for the dinner bell to ring. A tall well-dressed stranger approached us and asked where Mr. Davenport lived. The men suddenly became silent. Some of them started to walk away. I stepped forward and foolishly told him that Ben lived in the two-

story house near the entrance. After he left, the others surrounded me and started swearing and pushing me around. I was sure they were going to beat me up. They hissed at me to keep my mouth shut—never talk to strangers. "Don't give information to anyone-ever!" one man said. Another man threatened me by sticking his fist in my face. They told me the stranger might have been a lawman, a process server, a detective, or a Texas Ranger. The unwritten law of the circus was never to discuss another man's identity or whereabouts. Anonymity was very important. It was the law of survival. Since I was the new man they let me go. I never told a stranger about anyone again.

Because I was a teenager, the men didn't expect much from me. They called newcomers like me a first of May. I made two dollars a week. I was average sized, naive, and young. I had everything to learn about the basics of survival, so they tolerated me and told me to keep a low profile and stay in the background, which I did.

While exploring one day, I walked into the paint shop. Slim was the show painter and did beautiful hand lettering on the sides of the show trucks. He was the thinnest man I ever saw. He couldn't have weighed more than eighty or ninety pounds. He could have been the thin man in a sideshow but I didn't ask him if he was. He had a good personality and a wonderful sense of humor. He had a high energy level and could talk and paint signs at the same time. I enjoyed watching him work as I listened. He worked fast, using bright colors and making the letters large enough to be read from a distance. Slim made it look easy. When I mentioned I'd taken art in school he handed me a lettering brush and told me to get to work. He taught me how to hold the brush and how to paint smaller decorations on a couple of trucks. I had to walk outside the barn occasionally to breathe fresh air because the whole place reeked of paint thinner and turpentine. At the end of the day he carefully cleaned each brush in turpentine and dipped them in non-detergent motor oil so they wouldn't dry up. I was impressed by the way he took care of his equipment. It made me feel good to be an apprentice to a professional show painter—even if it was only for a few days.

Every once in a while, Slim's wife Betty, came by the shop to visit. She was overweight, quiet, and shy—a pleasant person to talk to. When I first saw her I was shocked because she had a long, black beard hanging to the middle of her chest. She explained that she had been a bearded lady in sideshows for many years. We all became friends. It felt good to have someone to talk to.

My last job in winter quarters was the most challenging. I worked for Ed Martin, the horse trainer. He taught liberty horses and ponies intricate new routines. With a single word the horses ran around a ring filled with sawdust. With a gentle flip of a whip the horses would dance, kneel, and bow to the audience. Ed had infinite patience, always

DIANO BROS. CIRCUS

FRANK FRANCOS - STEWARD

COOK HOUSE RULES

You will be assigned by the steward, according to your department to a table where you will sit for the season—with no exceptions.

ALL PERSONNEL must be fully clothed at all meals — hats to be removed while at the table. **WHEN** parades necessitate, all performers will be permitted to eat while in costume & makeup.

Profanity—Loud talking and visiting while in mess tent is not permissible— do your visiting elsewhere.

No dogs will be allowed in mess tent; tie yours up.

MEALS: A full set down breakfast will be served daily:— starting with "flag up" when first truck pulls on lot each morning — flag to remain up for 1 hour and 30 minutes.

Noon Lunch: — will be served daily from 12 noon to 1:30 p. m. — (flag will determine opening & closing of mess if parade route is long or delayed).

Evening Meal: — Flag up, when next to last act is on and will remain up 1 hour only.

VISITORS: They are welcome — but you must notify the steward **IN AMPLE TIME AHEAD** —A charge of 75c per meal will be made for visitors; you can sign up a deduction slip or pay cash.

Waiter Service: — You will have waiter service at all meals. Be seated at your respective table and your meal will be served — anything on the menu you don't want, tell your waiter please! Do not waste food! You are welcome to a second helping. Notify the steward of any discourtesies and any complaints — your waiter is under orders and will serve you promptly — Please eat and leave mess when finished. Don't sit and visit. The waiter will remove your dishes.

Your co-operation will mean better food as well as service.

NO DISHES OR SILVER ARE ALLOWED TO BE TAKEN OUT!

talking to them in a low voice. He held a practice session every evening and his animals trotted around the ring executing his commands. He demanded respect. Whenever a horse did something wrong, he stopped them and made them do it right. Once in a while he gave them treats, usually a small piece of food that he carried in his pocket. I admired his dedication and ability. He never touched the horses with his whip or stick. On the other hand, he was a hard and sometimes cranky man with people. I don't think he liked people very much.

My job was to clean stalls, water, feed, and curry the stock. I didn't like it, but it was the only work available at the time. The fresh straw and hay made a comfortable bed for me at night. I got used to the neighing and snorting of the horses and slept well.

One morning I stepped into a pony's stall with a currycomb to groom him. This particular pony didn't like me and turned his head to bite me. As I jumped back, he kicked me in the shin. The pain was terrible and I limped for several weeks. It felt like my leg was broken, but apparently it wasn't.

Working week after week and having no money became depressing. Mr. Davenport was strict about not letting the men work outside the gate, but I wanted an outside job. I found a *Billboard*, one day and read where a carnival was playing a small town south of us. The circus people didn't like carnivals or carnival people, called carnies. I was told to stay away from them or I would lose my job. I remembered from past experiences, however, that carnivals tore down on Sunday night and that they paid a dollar an hour for laborers. I saw a chance to make some money.

Hitchhiking was fairly common back then. I caught a ride to Cuero and found the carnival on the edge of town. The town was smaller than Gonzales, but the carnival drew a big crowd. I walked around the midway sizing up the show and I stopped to ask about possible work. One ride operator said he could use me. I was very hungry but I didn't have any money. I slept part of the night in some bushes in front of a private residence on a side street, but I didn't sleep well because I was afraid of being discovered and picked up by the police.

Without food, I started to panic. Early Sunday morning I walked through the deserted carnival midway frantically looking for a nickel or a dime that might have fallen on the ground. If I could get a candy bar I could stop shaking. How was I going to make it through the day without food?

I will always be grateful to God, to St. Christopher, and to carnival people for the miracle that happened next. A man saw me walking along with my head down and called me over to ask if I had eaten. I told him I was desperate for



Winter quarters

The Pfening Archives

food and he took me to the cook tent. A few carnies had already arrived and were eating breakfast. He told the waiter to give me a full breakfast and put it on his tab.

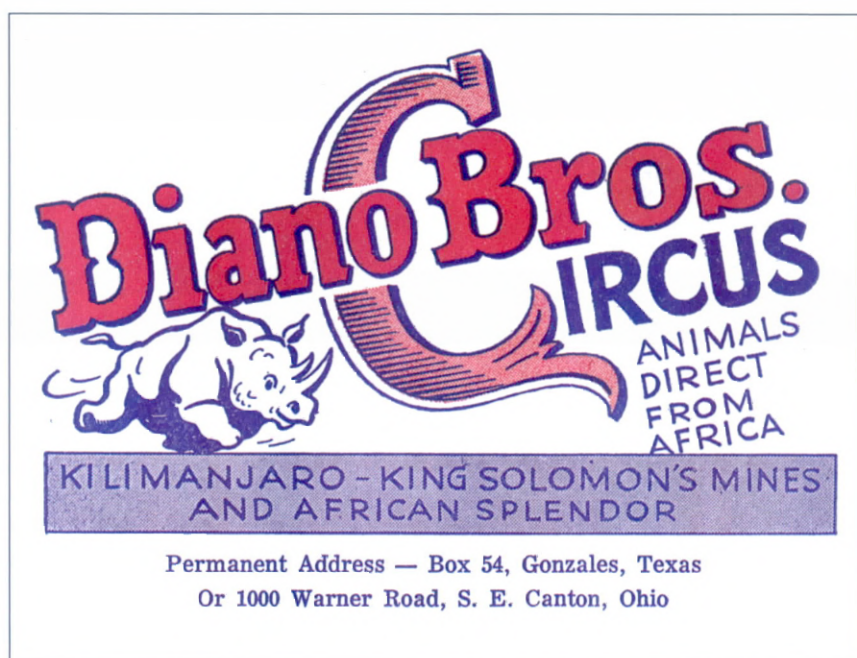
"Eat as much as you can, and I'll pay for it," he said. "No strings attached." It didn't matter that I didn't have any money.

I ate three full orders of ham and eggs, grits, toast, orange juice, and I drank several cups of coffee. I ordered pancakes with molasses and ate them. The waiter kept bringing me food. Everything was delicious. When I finished, my strength returned and I stopped shaking. It was good to be alive and to have a full stomach. I had never experienced a miracle like that in my life. As I left, I thanked the waiter and told him I didn't have any money and couldn't leave a tip. He told me not to worry—everything was taken care of.

I asked him where I could find the man who had paid for it all so I could thank him. The waiter said the man operated the gorilla show at the end of the midway. I found him and started talking to him. I asked if I could do some work to pay him back, but he said it wasn't necessary. I insisted, so he gave me a rake and I went in the cage to clean the floor.

The inside of the trailer was separated into two compartments. I went into the empty side and started raking. The smell of feces and rotten bananas made me so sick I almost vomited. When I looked up the gorilla was staring at me. It was so scary I was ready to jump out if he so much as moved. As soon as I was finished, I emptied the trash, spread fresh straw on the floor and got out of there, gasping for fresh air. I was so thankful for my freedom. The gorilla was stuck behind bars for life.

All afternoon and into the evening I walked the midway. I spent hours watching kids ride the Tilt-A-Whirl, the



Diano letterhead

The Pfening Archives

Roll-O-Plane, and the Merry-Go-Round. Everyone was having a good time.

People appeared to be spending a lot of money in the gambling joints. The joints were doing a brisk business and it was sad to see people who obviously couldn't afford to play these games consistently lose their money trying to beat the house. As I listened I heard that many families left the lot having spent their last nickel gambling. The carnival agents won and the public lost. For some people gambling provides a thrill and a temporary release from everyday life, but not for me. I gambled a couple of times when I was about thirteen—playing penny poker, but I never won and I soon decided it was boring and a wasteful use of time. Gambling can ruin a person if it happens to be his weakness.

Late that night I was hired to tear down kiddy rides and a small roller coaster. At four o'clock in the morning I was paid four dollars. I was happy, but I was hungry again. I walked to the edge of town looking for the highway to Gonzales. When I arrived back at winter quarters hardly anyone noticed I'd been gone.

A Night of Good, Clean Fun

One afternoon Slim and Betty asked if I'd like to go see the Wood's Family Circus in Harwood, Texas. I was really excited. After supper, Slim, Betty, Pee Wee, Bill, and I piled into Slim's '39 Chevrolet Coup and drove north to Harwood. It was a perfect evening and we were all in a good mood. Just as the sun was going down we spotted the profile of the big top in the middle of a field. It was a beautiful sight since we all loved the circus. We parked the car and walked to the entrance.

Tickets were sold from the back of a plain, unlettered

pickup truck. When the ticket taker found out we were with Diano Bros. Circus, he admitted us for nothing. It was a tall grass show, one that plays small towns. The midway was primitive. They had a pony ride and a small novelty stand. A single 150-watt bulb lit up the tiny entrance and the midway. We could hear a generator running full blast behind the big top. You could tell that these folks were very poor. Three old Second World War and one-half-ton army trucks carried the whole show. The trucks were worn out and had seen better days.

The owner, Mr. Woods, welcomed us warmly and escorted us front and center—the best seats in the house. The tent was full of ranch and farm families. The inadequate lights threw shadows on the performers, which added to the drama. I got a warm feeling such as I had never experienced before. I looked up and saw the stars shining through thousands of rips, tears, and holes in the canvas. Every star in the

heavens shone brightly overhead bringing to mind a song I learned as a kid: "The stars at night are big and bright-deep in the heart of Texas." If it had rained, though, we would all have been soaked.

Mr. Woods was a master showman and ringmaster who kept the show moving at a fast pace. The organ and the drum sat on the back of an old pickup truck. Some of the music was live and some was canned, but it was all traditional old-time, circus music. It was a wonderful show that brought tears to my eyes from beginning to end. They had liberty horses, ponies, dogs, a llama, a monkey, a juggler, a fire-eater, and a small aerial ballet. A three-pony drill passed under a stand and small dogs jumped on their backs. They rode around the ring and seemed to be happy to be performing. When the dogs got off a monkey jumped down from the stand to ride on the back of the pony.

The circus clown was the funniest I had ever seen. I laughed until my side ached. He was an old man dressed like a rodeo clown in a bright red shirt and baggy pants. He had a long, red handkerchief hanging from his back pocket. Men of his age would normally be retired, but there he was, making people laugh. I got the feeling the old man had many years experience entertaining people in rodeos, circuses and probably vaudeville. The audience appreciated his depth and gave him lots of applause.

Every member of the one-ring circus appeared in more than one act. Many talented children performed. Their costumes, plain and obviously homemade, had no sequins. The children didn't wear false eyelashes, nor did they have artificial grins. Their expressions showed innocence and satisfaction in being able to perform with their parents. When their act was over they left the ring with a bow and smile.

ROUTE CARD NO.

1



KILIMANJARO - KING SOLOMON'S MINES
AND AFRICAN SPLENDOR

SEASON OF 1953

DATE	TOWN	STATE	AUSPICE	MILEAGE
April 4	Gonza'es	Texas	Lions Club	5
April 5		SUNDAY		
April 6	Taylor	Texas	Fire Department	80
April 7	Temple	Texas	Lot and License	43
April 8	Bryan	Texas	Junior C of C	83
April 9	Huntsville	Texas	V. F. W.	64
April 10	Lufkin	Texas	V. F. W.	72
April 11	Crockett	Texas	Junior C of C	38
April 12		SUNDAY		
April 13	Palestine	Texas	Junior C of C	35
April 14	Jacksonville	Texas	B. F. W. C.	27
April 15	Henderson	Texas	American Legion	33
April 16	Athens	Texas	Kiwanis Club	72
April 17	Tyler	Texas	V. F. W.	36
April 18	Longview	Texas	Junior C of C	38

Allow enough time to reach
points named before dates given

Total Mileage
TO DATE

621

Harry Hammond, Permanent Address — Box 54, Gonzales, Texas
Or 1000 Warner Road, S. E. Canton, Ohio

Diano Bros. 1953 route card

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Everything was so perfectly done I had to pinch myself to realize the show was real and not a dream.

I completely forgot my aches and pains. The hardships of my life seemed to melt away. One of the most interesting acts was Sparky, the pick-out pony. Mr. Woods announced that Sparky was educated and could do many things. When he asked the pony if he liked boys it snorted, took two steps backward, and furiously shook its head. When it was asked if it liked girls, it took two steps forward, whinnied, and nodded yes, getting a big laugh from the audience. The prop men brought in a wooden stand and laid out cards with numbers on the cross bar. The kids were invited to ask arithmetic problems. One little girl asked, "How much

is three plus three?" Sparky trotted over and picked the six and pulled it out with his teeth. A boy asked, "How much is seven minus three?" The pony picked the four. The numbers were removed and colored silks were put in their place. A lady asked, "What color is my daughter's blouse?" Sparky picked out the yellow silk and took it to Mr. Woods. This continued for several minutes and the audience was spellbound. I was delighted because I had never seen anything like it and had no idea how it was done.

During the performance, Mr. Woods invited the audience to stay for the after show to see Dynamite, the bucking mule. At the end of the show few people left the big top. They paid a quarter to see several acts, including rope spinning, whip cracking, and a knife thrower. The five of us from Diano Bros. Circus were told to stay in our seats and see the after-show free. Each act was presented in a leisurely and relaxed manner that put the audience at ease. I thought the timing was perfect. Unlike a fast and noisy three-ring circus, everyone got to see everything that was going on—yet it retained a hundred percent circus quality.

The final act of the after show was a shorthaired mule named Dynamite. Mr. Woods challenged the young boys in the audience to

ride on the back of the mule for ten seconds and win a ten-dollar bill. A couple of boys tried, but they couldn't get up on his back. My friends told me to get out there and give it a try. Mr. Woods called me into the ring and said, "All you have to do is stay on his back for ten seconds and I'll give you a ten-dollar bill." The audience applauded and I reluctantly agreed to do it. I had never ridden a bucking mule before. I thought to myself: I hope this mule doesn't kick me in the head. I'd already been kicked in the shins by a pony in Gonzales, nearly broke my neck on a trampoline in Odessa, and been urinated on by an elephant in Tucumcari.

The back of the small creature was about thirty inches above the ground and I reasoned (1) The mule was small,

(2) I was strong, (3) Ten seconds wasn't very long, and (4) I could definitely use the ten dollars. I was broke.

When I put my leg over the mule, Mr. Woods told me to hold on to his mane and lean forward. When he let go all hell broke loose. First Dynamite bucked up and down and then he started twisting and turning and I got dizzy. The hide on his back was loose upon the frame and gave the impression that everything was sliding down from under me. His name was no exaggeration. He bucked so hard I flew up into the air feet first and came down on my head. Fortunately the ground was covered in eight inches of sawdust. When I opened my eyes I saw the top of the tent and the stars shining through the holes. The audience was yelling and applauding. I felt myself all over to see if I had any broken bones. The thick sawdust saved my life. Mr. Woods said I was a good sport and handed me three dollars for three seconds. Pee Wee slapped me on the back and everyone congratulated me. I was dizzy, happy, and rich all at the same time. I have often wondered if that was the time when sawdust got into my blood.

Afterward we helped take down the bleachers, dropped the sidewall and lowered the ragged big top. After we had loaded all the canvas and props we were invited to stay and eat. We had sandwiches, fruit, sweet rolls, and coffee. We were all very hungry and ate like kings. Food always tastes better out-of-doors.

Mr. Woods told us he was short-handed and asked if we would like to work for him. None of us did, but as we started to leave Mrs. Woods handed each of us a paper sack full of sandwiches and fruit, we drove back to Gonzales. I offered Slim a dollar for gas, but he turned the money down. Everyone had been so kind and I'd had so much fun and been fed so well. It was the end of a perfect evening.

The Canvas Cocoon

Organizing the circus in winter quarters was a big job. It took thought, money, and preparation. All our trucks and trailers had been rebuilt, or overhauled and painted. Slim was busy lettering signs and circus decorations on the sides of every vehicle. Performers arrived from all over the country and every day was a beehive of activity. The extremely talented Campa family arrived from Mexico to provide the core acts of the performance.

Opening day finally came on Saturday April 4, 1953, inside our winter quarters. It was a mass eruption of joy and excitement because we had been without anything bright



Tony Diano

The Pfening Archives

and happy for a long time. Huge crowds came to watch the parade. I had the unpleasant job of being a pony boy and leading two small, strong, stubborn ponies through the entire parade. When I walked between them holding their mouth bits, my hands became raw and started bleeding, but I didn't let go of them because I would have to chase them down and I was dead tired.

The day before Easter the weather was perfect. We had two shows. Both performances were straw houses. (When the crowd overflows the tent seating, people sit on fresh straw thrown on the ground.) It boosted our morale to have such a large audience to open the new season.

Tony Diano was one of the owners of the show. We heard through the grapevine that he was a millionaire from Canton, Ohio. He had made a fortune in the cement-mixer business. He also had a large zoo in Canton where he displayed the wild animals he collected as a hobby. When he went into partnership with Ben Davenport, he provided wild animals, trucks, paint, supplies, personnel, and money to get the show started.

Emma Valdez was one of the features of the Diano show.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Mr. Diano did a thoughtful thing that surprised many people. He invited a local priest to come out to winter quarters and bless the circus. The next morning, Easter Sunday, we left Gonzales and drove to Taylor, Texas. I was proud to be part of such a grand show. In Taylor, the lot was all grass and the weather was perfect. Everything was new and beautiful. We ate a big breakfast and set up the big top.

The tent is always set up first because it can be seen for miles and is great advertising. Many people came to see the activity that Sunday afternoon. They were especially interested in the elephants and lions. It felt like traveling with Noah's Ark. After the tent was erected and the animals fed, we took the rest of the day off. They had blue laws in Texas so no show was allowed on Sunday. It was a blessing because we were all exhausted.

Working for the circus was exhilarating. I never knew I could be so happy. When I lived with my mother and dad back in Albuquerque, I took so much for granted. All the little things were done for me. My clothes were washed, my

bed was made, and the house was always clean. But not in the circus. There, we did everything ourselves. We worked in our own departments so we had no time to interact with other employees unless they needed short-term help. I didn't know much, but I was an avid observer of the simplicity of circus life, a life consisting of the essentials: food, sleep, work, and transportation. It was a healthy life because we were outdoors all of the time. My whole system started to toughen up. I ate twice as much as usual. It was a life that gave me a new sense of accomplishment. We were finally moving out into the unknown.

I was suddenly conscious I could do things. The most important feeling I had was being in the heart of everything—of being a part of it, not a mere onlooker. I was a member of the team, no longer a “forty-miler” (a person who travels with a circus for 40 miles and then quits because the work is too hard). I promoted myself to “first of May” (a newcomer to the circus with little or no experience who is willing to work and learn). It

was an advantage to have worked in winter quarters because I knew a few people and I had more self-confidence. The men accepted me and now I was “with it and for it” (an expression which means you're a front-line infantryman in the circus army and willing to work and fight for its survival). It was an important designation. I felt like an equal.

Rumors started that we were heading for Beaumont, Texas and then New Orleans, Louisiana. Some of the old-timers said we were going to Canada because there was more money to be made up there. I was just glad we were heading east, away from New Mexico. Someone said, “We stick to the sticks.” (Towns of four thousand or less.)

The route card listed every town we would be in and when we would be there. They were sold in the “pie car,” a trailer that had all the attributes of a general store. I bought three route cards for twenty-five cents and sent one to my parents so they'd know where I was.

In Temple they asked me to be a prop man. I was glad to finally get away from the animals. I worked for Ernesto

Campa who was in charge of all circus props. He was a walking vitamin pill. He had more energy and strength than any man on the show. My first job was to unload ring curbs, which was much more difficult for me than for him because he could easily carry a seventy-five pound section of ring curb over his shoulder without breaking a sweat.

Ernesto performed several times in each show. He was extremely talented and so was his family. His wife and the other Mexican women were beautiful. They didn't speak much English, but that didn't make any difference to their abilities and looks. Emma Valdez, who was part of the family, did foot balancing on the trapeze. Little Roberto Campa was a trampoline sensation, doing forward and backward doubles and twists. The audience always gave him a lot of applause.

Allan Lightfoot also impressed me. He was known on the lot as Chief because he was a Native American Indian. He presented the Liberty horses in the center ring and later changed costumes and presented the boxer-dog balloon act. Next to the clowns, it was the funniest act in the circus. The dogs wore little football helmets. They chased the balloons, trying to bite them, until they popped.

In Huntsville I got a chance to work in concessions and make some money. The manager, Mr. Plunkett, hired me to run the popcorn joint on the midway. As a seat butcher I also sold novelties in the street parade each day. I ate in the cookhouse with the other butchers and slept on a steel bunk in the calliope wagon. It felt a whole lot better than sleeping in a pile of hay or in the cab of a truck.

Mr. Plunkett was one of the finest men I've ever worked for. He was the opposite of most managers. He never raised his voice or used foul language. He was honest, and he treated his men well. I trusted him and opened a small savings account with him.

Our daily routine started at five o'clock in the morning. After washing and shaving we had coffee, sweet rolls, and fruit in the cook tent. I filled my pockets with oranges and apples and went to my truck to check the oil. We then drove to the next town.

The icehouse was the center of our operation. It was our headquarters located in the backyard. After we set up the tent the Coca Cola truck arrived delivering dozens of cases of pop. When the iceman delivered large blocks of ice, we filled the tubs with soft drinks and iced them down. After breakfast I took an armload of pennants, toy swords, kewpie dolls, whips, horns, and other circus toys and walked through town selling in the parade. I got a lot of exercise. Fortunately, the police never asked

for a street vendor permit. I didn't have one. What I did have was sore feet. I realized the value of a good pair of heavy shoes, but mine had holes in the soles and the heels were run down. I had to watch where I walked so I wouldn't step in puddles.

Every day, in every town, we had a circus parade, one of the most powerful and persuasive advertising mediums the show possessed. Ben Davenport knew the value of a parade and put as many people and animals in it as he possibly could. It was clean, wholesome, and free entertainment—an important part of Americana.

It was also a living, moving stream of beauty, pageantry, and music. Riders on horseback carried banners and colorful flags. Ladies in glittering costumes astride prancing horses followed Arumi Singh's lion truck. We had a Wild West section with cowboys and Indians. The kids lining the street always got excited when they saw the clowns waving from the floats.

A long line of elephants with advertising banners for local business walked sedately in the rear of the parade. Then came the steam calliope, which went along belching smoke and steam and piping out beautiful music that could be heard for miles.

After the parade I was exhausted. We ate lunch and got



Diano on parade.

The Pfening Archives

a short rest. Then we were issued clean white aprons and paper hats. I popped corn on the midway as people arrived for the matinee. I paid the electrician two dollars a week to hook up to an outlet for the popcorn machine and a 150 watt light bulb. The midway was covered with sawdust and I put a lot of it inside my joint to make standing easier.

In the blow-off (when people were leaving) I stayed on the midway selling popcorn. Afterward we loaded our concession equipment into the grease joint (concession trailer). In several towns the local health department officials inspected our concessions. We were required to constantly wash our hands, always wear white paper caps, and be sure our aprons were clean. The grease joint had to have screens over all openings to keep flying insects out. We did our best to keep things as clean as possible.

At night we tore the circus down and loaded everything onto trucks in a highly organized manner. After all the concession equipment was loaded we went into the big top and loaded the quarter poles onto a flatbed truck. It was dusty work and when it rained it was muddy and miserable. As soon as we finished we became invisible, retreating into the darkness so we wouldn't be called for any more work. I always went to the pie car to buy sandwiches, a candy bar, and a beer. Mr. Davenport told us to keep quiet about the pie car because of the dry counties in Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri. The sheriff in each town allowed us to buy beer as long as we stayed on the lot and out of sight of the public. We were not allowed to bring townspeople into the backyard. But that was no problem because we rarely had time to meet any.

I fell into bed, exhausted, around midnight. The clean smell of fresh air came in through the window of the calliope wagon where I slept. When it rained the sound of raindrops hitting the metal roof lulled me even further into sleep. I was so happy in those days; the circus became a timeless place like no other place on earth.

Many unforgettable characters traveled with us. I enjoyed listening to them talk about show business and how they made their living. One night several of us were outside the pie car drinking beer in the dark and a big friendly Negro canvasman joined us. When he mentioned that he ate razor blades and glass we all got quiet. He picked up a piece of broken glass and had us look it over then bit off a piece and started to chew. I heard the crunching noise, but I could hardly believe my own ears. He chewed for a long time then



Diano Bros. Circus, 1953.

The Pfening Archives

opened his mouth to show us that it was full of ground glass. He swallowed it and washed it down with beer. He opened his mouth again and it was empty. I had never seen anything like it in my life. The thought of what he had done made me queasy.

The psychology of selling on the midway was interesting. Everything had a place and a purpose, even the colors. Red reigned supreme as the most important of them all. Children almost always chose red balloons. They had to be up to their maximum size so they would be full, round, and healthy looking. A half-blown balloon would seldom sell. Popcorn boxes had red stripes and bright red candy apples sold well too. Almost every product had red on it somewhere.

During performances we had a candy pitch, which was another source of income for the show. In the morning we carefully loaded red striped boxes with salt-water taffy. At the intermission the ringmaster stood in the middle of the center ring and made an announcement:

Ladies and gentlemen, Diano Bros. Circus takes great pleasure at this time in introducing a new and delicious candy confection. In order to acquaint you with the delights of this candy, the manufacturer has lowered the price. And in most of the boxes he has placed coupons that can be redeemed in the center ring. As you see, the valuable prizes are here ready to be redeemed. You will find such quality items as silk stockings, billfolds, watches, jewelry, purses, opera glasses, cuddly Teddy bears and much more. The salesmen will now pass among you. Open your box at once and show all your friends your coupon. Come here to the center ring where

I am standing and receive your valuable gift. It will not be surprising if those who buy first will get the best prizes. Don't wait, for we have a limited supply. The delicious candy confection inside the box is only twenty-five cents and your valuable coupon is also inside the box.

Mr. Plunkett gave me four coupons and I placed them inside the top four boxes. When the first four people bought candy they received the coupons and it encouraged others to buy. Most of the kids got excited and wanted a free prize. The customers came running and I seldom had to climb into the bleachers. Some people bought five or six boxes. I learned later that the gross income from the concession department amounted to approximately 10% of the income of the show. If the circus took in \$5,000 that day, the concession department brought in approximately \$500 of it.

My popcorn stand was located in the center of the midway in front of the "front door" which is what we called the main entrance. Location is important and the delicious aroma of hot, fresh popcorn could be smelled all over the midway. It was hard to resist. Hot days were most profitable. Sometimes I put extra salt on the popcorn so that people became thirsty. When we could no longer sell popcorn, Cracker Jacks, or candy apples, we ran to the icehouse and loaded up with cokes. They were ice cold. We couldn't sell them fast enough. It was an amazing experience because some people bought five or six bottles of pop at a time. There was little selling skill required. I just stood there opening bottles and making change. As soon as I ran out, I ran back to the icehouse and purchased another load. I never short-changed anyone but one time a customer bought five cokes from me, then turned and walked without taking his change. I worked on a commission basis and received 33⅓% of all the sales I made. I was happy and started to make a little money, but the work was hard and the pressure intense.

Our show had a banner man whose job was to contact local businesses and sell advertisements inside the big top. I heard through the grapevine that he sold from ten to twenty banners each day for twenty-five dollars apiece. The banners were large pieces of white butcher paper attached to a rope strung from pole to pole over the audience, inside the big top. These beautiful signs could be seen all over the tent. They were generally about four feet by ten feet. The name of the local business was in large red letters while the address was in smaller black letters. The banner man was an excellent sign painter and worked fast. I heard that he worked on a commission basis and his work was another source of income for the show.

The tractor-elephant tug-of-war was another event that attracted people, mostly farmers and ranchers. It was a publicity stunt paid for by the local Farmall, John Deere, Case, or Ford Tractor dealer. The newspaper advertised that a tractor would have a tug-of-war with a circus elephant. They wanted to demonstrate how powerful their tractors were. Sometime before the matinee started, an elephant was brought out and harnessed to the back of new tractor. At the signal, the elephant tried to pull the tractor backward over a line. The tractor always won.

Three times during the circus performance the ringmaster announced the "after show." Circus employees called this the concert. The performance cost fifty cents and everybody was invited to move into the reserved seats for a better view. The acts were: fancy rope spinning, fire eating, a trick horse, wire walking, and a dog act. A wrestling match between a circus employee and a local man gave the local an opportunity to win twenty-five dollars.

In the second half of the performance the ringmaster announced that the show was hiring young men to help take down the tent. They would be well paid and it wouldn't take long. We always had several teenage boys who stayed and helped. Usually everything went well and all the boys were paid. However, we ran into serious trouble with a sheriff in Arkansas.

We had a new "punk-pusher" (an employee who hires young boys and pays for labor) who turned out to be callous as well as dishonest. The circus people disliked him intensely. When the teardown was finished and it was time for the teenagers to receive their pay, he gave them a quarter and told them to come back in the morning for the rest. He planned, however to be gone with the circus before the young men even woke up.

One of the teenage boys who helped tear down was the son of the town sheriff. Late that night he brought



Dianno trucks and lot, 1953.

The Pfening Archives



Diano Bros. Circus, 1953.

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his father back. The sheriff ordered Tony Diano and Ben Davenport out of bed and told them the circus would not be allowed to leave until all the young men were paid. The owners of the show paid them in cash.

After the sheriff left, everyone was roused out of bed and we started hunting for the punk-pusher. It was raining so the grounds had turned to mud. There were no lights. It was pitch black with no moonlight. Everyone was in a foul mood. I heard the commotion when they found him passed out in the cab of a truck, the money in his pockets. They yelled and swore at him and even after I went back to bed I could hear them giving him a horrible beating. They ran him off the lot and he was never seen again.

As the weeks went by we had problems. Things seemed to be out of control. All circus employees live with certain daily apprehensions: elephant stampedes, truck wrecks, trapeze rigging snapping, heavy rain, and mud. One of the

most feared expressions in circus lingo is blowdown.

On April 28, 1953 in Benton, late in the afternoon, I was walking toward the big top with a load of popcorn. I looked up and saw a huge, black cloud about 700 or 800 feet high. Pushed by heavy winds it barreled toward us like a bowling ball rolling down the alley to strike the pins.

Arumi Singh's lion act had just started and the tent was full of people. Trees broke in half. Things flew through the air. Everything in its path was being destroyed. The tent inflated and stakes popped out of the ground spraying dirt everywhere. Quarter and side poles flew into the air like toothpicks. The tent rose into the air like a giant blimp. I couldn't believe my eyes.

The electric cables started sparking and then snapped. Electrical connections ripped apart. All over the midway the lights went out. Suddenly massive sheets of rain began to fall. Panic broke out. People stampeded and you could

hear their screams under the roar of the wind. The big top that had flown into the air came crashing down onto the stands, onto the rings. The rain was like a steel curtain that made seeing impossible. The lightning blinded me and the thunder deafened me so that I had to cover my ears with my hands. There was no shelter and no escape.

The ground turned into a sea of mud. The midway was a mass of wreckage. My popcorn joint was picked up by the wind and thrown across the midway. Popcorn spread everywhere in the mud. Every tent was blown to the ground and covered with mud. The sideshow was torn to pieces. At first I helped a few people off the ground and



Diano giraffe truck, 1953.

The Pfening Archives

onto their feet and pointed them toward the parking lot. There was a public telephone about a hundred yards away so I ran and called the operator. I told her to send the police and an ambulance to the circus lot. I ran back to the midway. Still people were running in every direction. The electrician yelled for me to watch out for hot cables coming out of the generator truck.

Most of the electrical connections were broken and capable of electrocuting us, as they lay hidden in the mud and water. To add to the chaos and confusion someone yelled that the lions were loose.

Employees ran to the trucks and turned on the headlights to try to pierce the darkness that lay over the lot. A few townspeople drove their cars to the edge of the big top and shined their headlights onto the dark canvas.

As the wind and rain slowly subsided and times between lightning bolts became longer, more people got off the lot. It took about an hour for the thunder to move off and the torrents of rain to become a drizzle. It then began to get cold and everybody started to shiver. Fortunately, the frightened lions found the doors to their cages open and jumped inside for safety. Singh warned us to be extremely cautious, as the missing one might be injured and dangerous.

To this day I don't know why I got brave and decided to search for the lion around back where there was very little light. When I lifted a piece of canvas and shined my flashlight into what remained of the tent, the beam caught the reflection of glowing eyes about five yards away. I was looking at the lion and she was looking right back at me. I dropped the canvas and ran for help. They backed the cage truck onto the canvas and one of the roustabouts cut a big hole for her to crawl out through. She sprang into the cage, and we sighed with relief. They were all safe and so were we.

I don't know what impels some men to extend themselves beyond all expectations. We were exhausted in mind and soul as well as in body, but we spent the night picking up pieces of equipment and rolling up canvas. Some of the local people stayed and helped us. It would have been good to have a raincoat and a pair of heavy rubber boots, but I had nothing except the shirt on my back and my shoes with holes in them. As soon as daylight came and we could see the remainder of the wreckage we finished cleaning, packed up, and drove to Little Rock.

On the lot the wheels sunk in water and mud. We had to buy many truckloads of cinders and sawdust for people to walk on. A large crowd came to see the animals and the wreckage. We were behind schedule and bone

tired, but we double and triple-staked the big top to anchor it. The stakes kept pulling out because it was so wet, but they finally managed to hold.

I admired Arumi Singh so much as he gave an interview to a local radio station. He was smiling and trying to be pleasant, but I knew he had been up all night taking care of his lions. After the parade we put on two shows. My respect for elephants doubled when I saw them putting up the big top, moving wet canvas, performing, and the next morning pulling the trucks through the mud and onto the paved highway so we could move on. The elephants (who worked for peanuts) were magnificent—worth their weight in gold. If the circus is like an army, then the elephants are the infantry—always on the front line winning daily battles and pulling everyone else forward.

Today, as I look back, I see why Mr. Davenport and the Ringling brothers valued elephants. They may have large bodies and take up a lot of room, and they may be expensive to purchase and care for, but they always attract paying customers and more than pay their own way, especially on the road. Ben Davenport had eight Asians and Tony Diano had seven, some of them Africans.

Some people think that circus animals live a miserable life. They are taken from town to town and always on exhibit. They're put through silly tricks for the amusement of people who may not be as intelligent and sensitive as they are. But most of the time their lives are good. They get used to the circus routine and accept it as a normal way of life. No expense is spared for their safety and health. They are loved and cared for 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Many of the men had no family so they took care of the animals as if they were their children. A veterinarian traveled with us and was on call day and night. If a circus employee was ever cruel to an animal he was usually fired.

The animals do not go on strike. Their pay is food, a



Diano #93 stringer truck (left) and #99 spool truck

The Pfening Archives



Ticket wagon

The Pfening Archives

place to sleep and rest in the shade, plenty of love and attention, and of course applause from the audience.

The proof of their adaptation is their remarkable health. They wouldn't be so friendly and affectionate to trainers and keepers if they were mistreated or unhappy. Living outdoors also contributes to their well-being.

The circus had its own rigid moral code. There was an ingrained sense of class distinction. At the lowest level were the casual laborers, mostly temporary. Then there were the roustabouts and canvasmen. Next came the wranglers and grooms who took care of the animals. There were side-show personnel, prop men, riggers, ushers, front-door men, and concession people. Above the musicians in status were beautiful young girls who might go on to become important performers.

Some circus employees had superstitions. Harmonicas bring bad luck. Whistling in the big top brings bad luck. Disaster and misfortune come in threes. A bird flying into the big top is bad luck. There were so many I couldn't even remember them all.

The performers stayed to themselves and they wore beautiful and expensive costumes during the performances. But the rest of us dressed pretty much alike, in work clothes.

The public never knew about the seamy and unstable side of circus life. They were unaware that we had internal problems every day. On payday some men got drunk then they quit or got fired. New men were hired to take their places. I sometimes felt as if I had joined the French Foreign Legion where men want to remain unknown and unrecognized. We did our jobs, kept a low profile, and got tough when necessary in order to survive. The only time I dropped my guard was at night when I drank a beer and went to bed. I slept like a baby. It was a safe feeling, sleeping in the callopie wagon, because nobody knew I was there, except Mr. Plunkett and Mr. Davenport.

Nobody seemed to know much about Tony Diano. I seldom saw him on the lot, but he was there. Ben Davenport, on the other hand, was feared and highly respected because of his many years in the circus business. At one time, when he was a young man, he was a prizefighter. He was now the general of the circus army. In winter quarters and on the road, he kept things running. I read somewhere his father was a Methodist minister. In a way, Mr. Davenport reminded me of my dad. He was straight. He wore an old slouch hat and work clothes. If you didn't

know who he was you'd say he was just another workingman. Someone on our show said that Ben never signed a contract. All agreements were verbal.

I was the driver of a Ford van that pulled a travel trailer owned by Tony Diano. We traveled without maps so one of the other drivers taught me how to read the arrows that showed the way. Early in the season it seemed complicated because I didn't know what to look for. But after a couple of days it became simple. The twenty-four hour man took care of the arrows marking the route after he found the safest and shortest routes. He then stapled or taped white cards with red arrows at eye level to telephone poles, signposts, and fences so we didn't have to take our eyes off the road. It was a good system and worked well. If the arrow pointed up, it meant go straight ahead. If it pointed to the left or to the right we were to turn in that direction at the next intersection. When it pointed down, we slowed to be ready for an important change in direction. They had no meaning to the average person because they carried no printed message, but to us drivers, it was a matter of life and death.

I loved driving a small circus truck through the countryside, especially in Arkansas and southern Missouri. I kept the window open, except when it rained. I liked driving through mist and the wonderful scent of hay and alfalfa early in the morning when everything was moist and green. It was a time of overpowering beauty and peace. I felt a little ahead of the rest of the world—free as a gypsy with the wind at my back and the endless road ahead. It was not only beautiful, but healing as well.

In Arkansas I saw the Ozark Mountains every day. Where there was no traffic I slowed down, stuck my head out the window, and breathed in the cool fresh scent of the trees. Coming down into a valley, it looked like a lush green carpet below me. It made me forget all my aches and pains and renewed my strength. It felt good to be alive!

All my life I thought automobile accidents happened



Diano Bros. Circus, 1953; #42 cage wagon, #91 bandwagon, #33 air calliope, hippo wagon.

The Pfening Archives

only to other people. But one morning when I was driving north in Arkansas, heavy, dark clouds started to roll in. I slowed down, turned on the headlights, and rolled up my window. It was a terrible storm. It rained so hard the windshield wipers were useless. I couldn't tell how fast I was going because the truck started hydroplaning and the speedometer needle gyrated wildly. I lost control of the truck and the trailer swung out and hit another car. I glided off the highway into a deep ditch filled with water. We didn't have seat belts so my body flew around inside the cab like clothes in a dryer. The next thing I knew several circus people were pulling me out. I was shook up, but not hurt. The elephant truck pulled up behind us and two elephants were unloaded. They pushed the truck upright with their heads then were harnessed to pull the truck out of the ditch. It still ran all right and they said to keep following the arrows to the next lot. When I got there Tony Diano was waiting for me. All his personal belongings inside the trailer were probably sopping wet and full of mud. Things were broken. He had already paid \$50 for damage to the other car. I felt sick about what had happened, but when I tried to explain he hit me on the side of the face and knocked me to the ground. I got up and ran away as fast as I could. I knew he was going to kill me. My face was swollen for a couple of days and I couldn't hear out of my left ear.

On Sunday May 10, 1953, we arrived in Poplar Bluff, Missouri where the big top was set up as usual. Anyone on

our show who had any money went into town and rented a room. I wanted to bathe, wash my clothes, and sleep in a real bed. I found a hotel that looked inexpensive and when I got to my room I was impressed at how clean and well decorated it was. There were doilies on the tables, lace curtains, and a large bathroom at the end of the hall. I found a couple of bars of soap and took five baths in a short space of time. It felt good to wash my clothes in the bathtub, especially my underwear. I hung it all next to the window to dry. And from that window I could see the entire main street. I stuffed some clean cardboard inside my leaky shoes. I found a Holy Bible in a drawer and it made me so homesick I wrote my folks a long overdue letter on hotel stationery. For the first few hours in my room, I had an odd feeling of guilt. There was a constant supply of hot water. I found that I had strong willpower when it comes to readjustment to a comfortable life. After a couple of hours I said to myself, "Boy, take it while you can get it." I didn't feel the least bit ashamed anymore.

The next morning I finally got to see the Mississippi River. It was so wide I could hardly see the other shore. It was very different from the Rio Grande in Albuquerque, which was a small stream by comparison. Large boats and barges were going up and down and it was wonderful! The eerie sound of the horns ran shivers up and down my spine. The humidity was terrific. I got in a taxi and told the driver I wanted to be able to say I'd been in Illinois so he drove me

over the bridge and back. I handed him the fee, a dollar, and a small tip. As he drove away he gave me a funny look. I suppose no one had ever made that exact request before.

Somewhere in Arkansas a new man joined our show and worked in the concession department with us. Someone gave him the name, "California Bill." He and I became friends. He was a sharp young man about my age and a good worker. He had previous experience in outdoor show business on the west coast. He said carnivals move once a week instead of every day. He told me I could make more money in a big city working for a carnival. We watched the *Billboard* magazine and saw where a couple of shows were playing the St. Louis area. I became interested.

It was an emotional time because I loved the circus life and didn't want to give it up. But I couldn't keep up the fast pace. I didn't want to sell popcorn for the rest of my life, and I needed a rest. California Bill offered me a new way of life that had always fascinated me. He had a car and said he'd take me with him to St. Louis if I'd quit the circus.

When I told Mr. Plunket I was leaving to look for work in St. Louis, he gave me all my savings and said I could come back to work for him any time. As I left Diano Bros. Circus in Crystal City, I had a tired sense of relief. I was in St. Louis for a week and worked in a carnival sideshow as the Alligator-skinned Boy. I then returned home to Albuquerque to finish high school and go to the university.

Working for Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus

When I was eighteen years old the call of the calliope was a powerful magnet that once again pulled me away from home. Every spring the urge to go on the road takes me out of reality and into the illusion of seeing America and living like a gypsy. I had to go. I didn't know it at the time, but that year I was to be a small part of a historical season. It was the last time the *Greatest Show on Earth* was to be shown under canvas.

In March of 1956, I sent a job application to the circus winter quarters. I never expected to hear from them, but several weeks later I received a letter from Rudy Bundy who was one of the executive managers on the show. He stated that they might have a job for me when they opened under canvas in Baltimore, Maryland.

As I began to prepare for the trip, I dreamed of seeing the big cities on the East Coast, and another part of America. I packed a small suitcase and an AWOL bag and made sure my St. Christopher metal was safely tucked into my billfold. In all the excitement, however, I forgot to take an extra pair of shoes—for which I would be sorry.

In Baltimore, down by the railroad tracks, two policemen stopped and told me to get into the back of their car. They questioned me to find out if I was a kid running away from home. They checked my driver's license and finally looked at the letter from Mr. Bundy. Satisfied, they wished

me good luck as I got out of the car. I was flattered that they wanted to talk to me. It made me feel grown up even though to most people it would have been threatening.

I walked to the circus lot on the Pulaski Highway. I had no trouble finding it because the big top was so huge you could see it from miles away. The sideshow top was bigger than most circus tents are today. Tractors, trailers, bulldozers, and private vehicles ran in every direction as a crowd of thousands watched the circus go up. It was a nerve wracking and tremendously exciting sight. I couldn't wait to be part of it.

They weren't interested in hiring me at the concession department so I walked over to the front door and talked to a man named Sammy. He took a look at my letter and told me to wait. I watched the men setting up the front door until he came back. I had a job in the usher department as a ticket taker.

I took off my shirt because it was hot and I knew I'd get sweaty. We placed the poles in position and drove the stakes into the ground. I helped raise the tent. It felt good to get my hands on canvas again. The canvas and ropes, everything was new and smelled great. When we finished, Sammy issued us a badge and a meal ticket and then took us to the dining tent. We ate a big breakfast and were then taken to the ushers tent and issued uniforms. They consisted of dark blue pants, a light blue shirt, black tie, and a dress cap. At the end of every day we turned them in and we'd be issued a fresh one the next day. I was impressed that all the uniforms were new, were cleaned each day, and that they spent so much money on maintenance. Their cleaning bill must have been huge. We had to bathe and shave every day, for which I was grateful. They charged us fifty cents a week for buckets of cold water, bars of soap, and razor blades.

Living out-of-doors gave me a big appetite and the food was extremely good. The excellent food and service were one of the benefits of working for the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus. It helped to make up for the long hours, hard work, and low wages. I began to see that the original five Ringling brothers and Ben Davenport had a common denominator: feed your employees well and they'll work well and stay with the show.

Someone would yell, "The flag is up." It was a large triangular shaped flag hoisted to the top of the dining tent when it was time to eat. It could be seen all over the lot. Nobody was allowed inside the tent until the flag was up and our meal ticket for that day had to be punched by the doorman who also checked badges and IDs.

There always appeared to be a lot of chaos in the dining tent with hundreds of employees coming in and going out. They served thousands of meals every day and yet there was discipline, courtesy, and neatness. I really enjoyed it all and ate like a king; however, there was a strict caste system where roustabouts, train crew, animal men, Negroes, and

anyone not wearing a clean uniform sat on one side of the tent. Managers, performers, band members, ushers, front door men, sideshow performers, clowns, and VIPs ate on the other side of the partition.

We didn't wear our uniforms to breakfast because we were setting up the show and didn't want to get them dirty, but we wore them to the other meals. Nobody was allowed inside the dining tent looking sloppy. No bare feet, either. When some of the men tried to get in without shirts, they were turned away.

The tent held hundreds of tables and seats. The long wooden dining tables were covered with bright-checked oilcloths. Each table had a flower or decorative centerpiece as well as sugar, salt, pepper, toothpicks, napkins, and jelly. Every table came with a waiter in a clean white coat and a white cap. Some of the better-paid employees tipped their waiter more than we did. It was simple, if you didn't give him his tip, you didn't eat. As far as I know, his total income was derived from our weekly three-dollar tips. On payday I paid the waiter first.

The air was filled with the good smells of food, flowers, and fresh sawdust on the ground. Loud and vulgar language

was forbidden.

For all three meals we sat at the same table. The waiter brought coffee, fruit juice, and water, and then recited the menu for that meal. In a few minutes he brought a plate of hot food. If I wanted more, I asked.

A typical breakfast was pork chops, bacon, sausage, eggs (scrambled or over-easy), milk, cold cereal, or oatmeal. We were served sweet rolls, pancakes, and fresh fruit. The pancakes were delicious and I always had an extra serving.

Lunch might consist of juice, milk, fresh fruit, meat loaf, cold cuts, or a hamburger steak. We had hot homemade bread and dinner rolls at all meals. There were all kinds of salads. We had ice cream and fresh apple or cherry pie for dessert.

Dinner was served between the matinee and the evening show. We had sirloin and T-bone steaks, sliced beef or pork, barbecued ribs with mashed potatoes, tossed salad with a choice of several dressings, and fresh bread and butter. There was fresh fruit, ice cream, and cake. The circus was like the Army, it traveled on its stomach.

The first thing after breakfast we set up the front door (marquee). We unloaded wagons and trailers containing



A union picket line in front of the Ringling show in 1956.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

canvas, poles, stakes, hammers, ropes, chains, signs, steel turnstiles, steel ticket boxes, and flags. All work was done by hand. We didn't have forklifts or machines to make work easier. We had about fifteen men in the front door department. After everything was installed, several large trucks brought loads of fresh sawdust and dumped it in large piles inside our tent and on the midway.

Circus-goers started arriving on the midway before we were finished. The sideshow did a big business. Long lines at the ticket wagons convinced me the show was making money. The concession stands were swamped. Two at a time, we went to the usher's tent to wash and put on our uniforms. We then rushed over to the dining tent for lunch. By the time we got back there were so many people I couldn't see the concession stands or the ticket wagons. The crowd in the huge midway reminded me of cattle packed into a corral with no water or shade. Senior citizens and children got crushed and I felt sorry for them. Everyone wanted to get inside the big top where they could sit down out of the sun. Emotions ran high and I could see apprehension and pain on the faces of the customers. The matinee was never shown on time, they were still setting up the seats. We always arrived late at every town. Someone in our department named us the "Latest Show on Earth."

The doormen I worked with were uneasy about holding the crowd back. The people kept pushing and shoving against the railing that separated us. The steel pipes began to bend from the strain. If they had broken the crowd would have stampeded and we would have been seriously injured. The only thing we could do was to tell them we would open in a few minutes.

At every show the crowd became unruly and defiant and sometimes they even got violent. Some people cursed us and called us names because we wouldn't let them in. My clean shirt was sopping wet and stuck to my back, not only because it was hot and humid, but also because I was scared. Fortunately, the head usher furnished us with salt tablets and cold water to drink.

At last the big top was ready and Sammy ran into the marquee yelling, "doors!" We immediately dropped the chains and started tearing tickets as fast as possible. A doorman's job always looked easy—until I became one. People smashed into each other to get through the turnstiles. All sense of order and courtesy disappeared.

We gave the customer half and dropped the other half into steel boxes: one box for reserved seats, another for general admission seats, and a third box for free passes. I tore tickets so fast I didn't have time to segregate them. The colors got mixed and I gave up and started throwing all the stubs into one box. My fingers became raw. When I took my hat off to wipe my brow, the sweat rolled into my eyes. I lost track of time. I didn't have time to be courteous. When someone asked a question I'd say, "straight ahead."

I knew the show was starting when I heard the beautiful sounds of the circus band behind me. We began to see the midway again, a little at a time as the crowd began to thin out. We always had latecomers who bought their tickets in a hurry and ran through our turnstiles. I could barely grab their tickets and tear them in half before they were gone. After all, it was the *Greatest Show On Earth*. When the show started we stayed at the front door. I never did get to see the show, itself, but I heard that it was very good and well worth the price of admission.

We took the steel boxes loaded with stubs over to the sideshow trailers. We placed them on tables attached to the wall under a string of light bulbs and dumped them. We segregated them according to color and counted each ticket, put a rubber band around a stack of one hundred tickets, and then we initialed the bundle. The next man took it apart and counted them again. Except for the free passes, which were only counted once, all tickets were counted three times. They were then thrown into large canvas bags and sent to the bookkeepers and auditors. It was hot in the trailer and I took off my shirt. I stayed near the open door since there was no ventilation.

After we counted the stubs we went to eat. After the evening show we changed back into our own clothes and loaded steel plates, (called bibles) onto the seat wagons. The huge steel plates were extremely heavy and took from four to six men to lift. The edges were rough so I had to buy a pair of canvas gloves so they wouldn't cut my hands. As soon as we finished, we went to the bus, rode out to the circus train to our coach. By this time it was midnight.

The circus had a converted school bus that carried personnel back and forth from the railroad cars to the lot. It ran all day and all night. When we left our coaches in the morning we rode the bus straight to the lot. The lot might be many miles away but the driver knew the streets and the short cuts through town. He not only kept the bus clean, but kept us current on the latest news, weather, and gossip. Because the bus was not loaded onto the flat cars, he drove it from town to town.

The driver told me he had a cot and a bedroll and slept in the bus at night when we were on the road. Late at night when we rode back to the circus train he not only took us into the dark railroad yards, but sometimes he drove on the track right up to our coach, especially if it was raining. He was a good-natured man who did an excellent job. I had to pay him fifty cents a week to ride, but of course it was worth it.

All the ushers and front door men slept in one coach. The only way we could tell our coach from the others was by the number painted on the side. There were a few simple rules. Once on board, we were not supposed to leave. I was lucky because I was not only a circus fan, but I was also a railroad fan. I loved the smell of the railroad yards and I

liked to watch the cars being switched around. If I'd been able to stay awake I could have seen activity all night long.

The inside of our coach was lined with three tiers of two-man bunks on both sides of the aisle. I was lucky to be assigned a top bunk by myself. I was issued two sheets, a pillow, a two-inch thick mattress, and two blankets. It was comfortable even though there was no curtain. The coach porter stored my suitcase and showed me around. At the entrance he had a fold-down bed located over the door. This was the lobby area where he ran a concession stand or commissary. He sold sundries like sandwiches, Cokes, beer, soap, and razor blades. At night I had a couple of sandwiches, a couple of beers and a box of cookies. At the other end of the coach a tiny restroom had a toilet and a small sink to wash in.

A sign said, "DO NOT DRINK THE WATER," and I didn't. The smell of disinfectant was overpowering except when the train was moving and some fresh air came in through the cracks. I got used to it. The porter swept and mopped the floors daily. He changed the sheets on the beds

and kept the coach as neat and orderly as possible.

Early in the morning when everyone was still asleep, I took a sink bath in the restroom. There was no hot water so I got used to bathing and shaving with a bar of soap and cold water. The train rocked fairly violently as we moved and it was hard not to cut myself. I held onto the wall with one hand and shaved with the other. As soon as I was finished I washed my extra underwear and socks with the bar of soap. They dried under my mattress by the next morning.

Every night men drank beer and wine, played poker, shot craps, and gambled on the floor of the aisle and in their bunks. I ate in my bunk out of the way. The noise and cigarette smoke were terrible. I was so glad when we started moving because the windows were open a little and the smoke blew out. In a couple of hours everyone was asleep, some in the aisle. You had to be careful where you walked. It was every man for himself. Stealing was almost common, so if you had anything valuable like a wristwatch, you wore it all the time. I undressed in my bunk, rolled up my clothes,



Ringling Bros. Barnum, Bailey Circus
Last Stand Under Canvas
Pittsburg, Pa. July 16 1956

The final Ringling big top

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

put them under my pillow and hid my billfold in my under-pants.

When we were in Washington D.C. I spent my last seventeen dollars on a pair of new boots. They felt good, and I was proud to wear them. I made a big mistake. When I went to bed I placed the boots at the foot of my bunk and forgot to cover them. When I woke up the next morning, they were gone. I complained to the porter and to the other men, but they just laughed and called me stupid. I never found them. It really hurt.

Fortunately, I saved my run-down shoes. I stuck a piece of cardboard inside and used them every day for the rest of the tour. At night I put them under my pillow. I had learned an expensive lesson about taking care of my belongings.

The circus train usually started moving about two or three o'clock in the morning. The only sounds in our coach were the men snoring and coughing. The diesel locomotive hooked up to the train, and we moved slowly out onto the main line heading for tomorrow's town. It was a thrill. I learned that we never traveled faster than thirty miles per hour because we were classified as fourth-class freight. We had the lowest priority on the tracks. Whenever any train got close, coming or going, we had to pull into a siding and wait for them to pass. Many times we would sit on a lonely siding out in the middle of nowhere for an hour or so. It didn't bother us too much because we were all asleep.

Many times while we were sitting in a siding waiting for some empty freight train to pass us, it became very quiet. If I was awake I could hear the crickets out in the nearby field. One night a sleek passenger train passed like a tornado in the night. The air stream rocked our coach like an explosion. There was a great roar and dust everywhere. My bed was covered with cinders and dust. We all awoke for a second, yawned, coughed, scratched, and went back to sleep.

One night while sitting on a siding, I heard a fast train approaching and looked out the window. It was an empty cattle train that smelled like manure. The odor was so strong I had to close my window to breathe.

Most of the time I liked sleeping in a bunk on the circus train. I didn't care for the drinking and gambling, but it went with the territory, so I tried to shut it out of my mind. When we were going along and the train was rocking it was like being in a cradle and I slept like a baby. Most of the railroads didn't like carrying circus trains. They were considered a nuisance. Our train messed up their schedules and they didn't like the responsibility of hauling wild animals in cages on the flat cars. They didn't like the transients who jumped on the train at the last minute because they couldn't tell if they were bums or circus workers. Once, I heard through the grapevine that a man had been killed falling onto the tracks in between the moving cars. Unfortunately, some of them drank heavily and became careless. It could be dangerous around the train and in the railroad yards. In

a short time the death was forgotten, because the man had no identification.

I was told an employee had to stay in the background. If we talked to strangers or the police we'd be in trouble. If the train was stopped for any reason and we couldn't make it to the next town on time, we'd all be out of a job.

Every day we had problems on the show. I thought it was a rough life, but when we got to Philadelphia I found out just how rough it could be. The bus driver told us the bad news as we rode to the lot. We were going to have to cross picket lines. The Teamsters' Union wanted the circus employees to join and this was their way of forcing the issue. When we got there men were walking back and forth carrying signs in one hand and clubs in the other. None of us wanted to join the union.

We needed to get through with our trucks, which were loaded with hay, meat, and feed for the animals. We had more trucks with food for the employees. We had tons of sawdust. We had spent a lot of money in the town, but we felt great tension and hatred as the trucks rolled slowly through the picket line. I saw someone throw a brick through the windshield of one of the show trucks. The shattered glass flew into the face of the driver and when he put his hands over his face blood poured through his fingers. I saw a circus employee jump on the running board and pull him out of the cab. Others came and helped lay him on the ground and tried to stop the bleeding with towels. Soon they carried him off to the hospital.

Word spread around the lot and the elephant men acted immediately. I ducked out of the way when I saw a great herd of twenty or thirty elephants come rumbling toward me. They trumpeted and growled as they attacked the screaming picketers. The union men dropped their signs and clubs and ran for their lives. The crowds who were there watching ran, too. For awhile the trainers had no control over the elephants and chaos reigned. I was as frightened as everyone else. I saw an elephant chase a man down a side street. If he had caught him he would have killed him. It was a deadly situation for the picketers, but thank God, to my knowledge no one got hurt. Eventually the huge animals were herded together and taken back to the lot. The elephants and trainers had gone into battle where everyone else was afraid to go. I have a great respect for elephants.

The circus was in six different businesses:

- (1) Transportation: transporting tons of animals, people, and equipment all over America.
- (2) Food service: serving thousands of meals to employees, guests, and animals.
- (3) Hotel business: providing sleeping accommodations for employees and guests.
- (4) Construction business: building a tent amphitheater and a traveling city every day, rain or

shine, at a new location.

- (5) Storage: providing enclosed space in winter quarters to store tents, props, equipment, costumes, and animals until the next season.
- (6) Entertainment: the only business that brought in money. The show must go on, or go broke.

As we headed north into New England, I started thinking about what was happening and what I wanted. While I was in Waterbury, Connecticut, I did some simple arithmetic.

Weekly Income: \$ 35.00

Weekly Expenses:

Waiter (dining tent)	\$ 3.00
Porter (train)	3.00
Head Usher (clean uniforms)	.50
Bus Driver (transportation)	.50
Porter (commissary)	10.00

TOTAL \$17.00

\$35.00 income - \$17.00 expenses = \$18.00/week

Work: 10:00 A.M. through 11:00 P.M. = 13 hrs/day
13 hrs/day x 7 days = 91 hrs/week
\$18.00 ÷ 91 hrs = 20¢/hour

It was a long journey. I'm thankful to God that I am still alive. America is beautiful and I was happy to see it. Thank you for reading my story. **Bw**

*You can shake the sawdust off your shoes,
but you can't shake it out of your heart.*

About the author

By the time Leon Holecheck was fifteen he'd fallen passionately in love with the circus. He asked his parents if he could go on tour with it, and so his circus life began. On his travels a circus old timer once said, "Whitey, you're just a kid now and on the adventure of your life. Be careful, some day you'll want to grow up. Get out of here while you can and go back to school. You hang around the circus long enough and you'll get sawdust in your blood."

Sure enough, Leon kept his love for the circus all his life. When he finished high school and did a stint in the army, he became a clown. He loved to visit hospitals and make sick children laugh. He is also an artist who specialized in painting images of clowns. He has been a member of Clowns of America, Elks Clown Unit, Circus Fans Association of America, and the Circus Historical Society.



Diano bandwagon #91

The Pfening Archives



The American flag leading the Diano parade.

The Pfening Archives

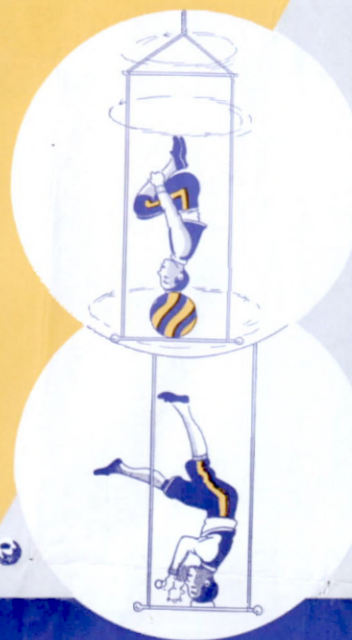
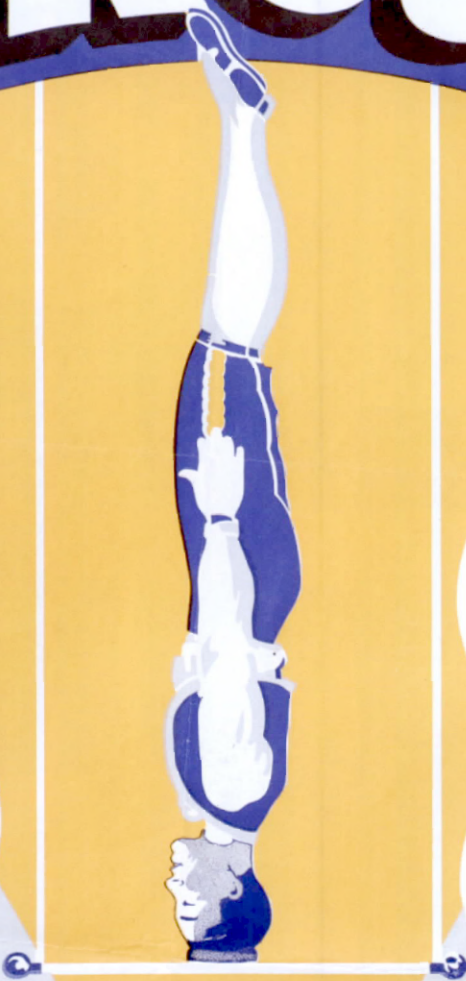
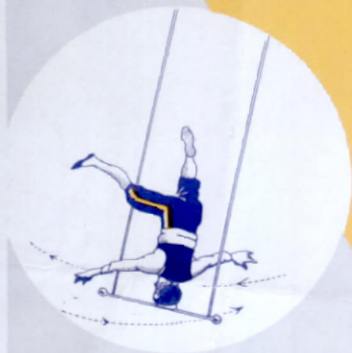


Only out for a single season in 1953, there are relatively few images of the Diano Bros. Circus. The Circus and Allied Arts collections, Illinois State's Milner Library, includes only seven images from the show, with no specific identifications of the people depicted. These images are featured on this left hand page. The bulk of the illustrations for this article come from the Pfening Collection, collected by Fred Pfening, Jr., seen at the top of the right page, standing with Tony Diano. The litho is part of the Howard Tibbals Collection at the Ringling Museum. It is through the dedication of collectors, libraries, and museums that the histories of circuses from Ringling to Diano can come alive on the pages of Bandwagon. We are all grateful for their part in preserving these stories for the future.





KAY BROS CIRCUS



SAIJIRO KITCHIE
THE GREATEST OF ALL
JAPANESE HEAD BALANCERS
ON THE SWINGING TRAPEZE